

"There is nothing like a Zimbabwean culture. There are Zimbabwean cultures."

Kucaca Phulu visited Budapest on the 28th February, as a delegate of the Zimbabwe Europe Network. Also stopping by in Geneva and Brussels, as part of its European-wide advocacy tour, the network aimed to ensure that progressive policies and actions were taken by the European Union concerning Zimbabwe. Phulu is the president of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association and a member of the country's biggest minority, the Ndebele. Located mostly in the West and South-West region, now called Matabeleland North and South, the Ndebele make up 10-15 per cent of more than 12 million Zimbabweans. Phulu believes that a future, democratically elected government will not be able to bypass addressing minority issues, currently subdued in the political dialogue, if it wants to establish a strong democratic state. Phulu is based in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

What do you think about the ongoing events in Libya? What message have the North African protests sent to the Zimbabweans?

There is an assumption that Zimbabwe is in a pre-Egypt era. The truth is, however, that we are in a post-Libyan era. We had food riots in 1997 and a massive demonstration in 2000 against the then proposed new constitution. The protests resulted in the formation of a broad-based civil society movement and the emergence of a new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This did not put President Robert Mugabe out of power, but significantly changed the country's political landscape. In 2008, supporters of the MDC and party leader Morgan Tsvangirai were targeted with massive violence when protesting against flawed elections: thousands of people were injured or killed. My organisation, the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association, documented these abuses. Out of the visual materials, we compiled a photo exhibition called *Reflections*, which can be seen now in Budapest and Geneva. After the post-election violence, in the same year, we created a framework to transfer power. The power sharing executive government is not performing according to our expectations, but it nevertheless exists. Now we need to ensure that this agreement produces results and achieve a roadmap for the next elections, which would define how power should be handed over. Naturally, the Mugabe-led Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) is resisting.

Use the clip of Phulu talking about the North African protests in your own interview. Clip 1.

Are minority rights enshrined in law in Zimbabwe?

The current government is not able to put food on the people's table, or even able to run a post office. The current government arrests people and keeps them in jail, and puts in place unjust laws.

Consequently, it is very far from considering minority issues.

Let's take the language issue as an example. Besides the three official languages, English, Shona and Ndebele, there is a diversity of minority languages in Zimbabwe, such as Venda, Tonga, Shangaan, Kalanga, Sotho, Ndau and Nambya. It is a big problem that they are not officially recognised. Each language carries culture and it is sad that a lot of children cannot study in their mother tongue at school. In the media, people talk about Zimbabwean identity and Zimbabwean culture. But there is nothing like a Zimbabwean culture. Zimbabwe is made up of different cultures of different tribes living in its territory. We must celebrate the nature of diversity and I don't think we celebrate it enough. A framework is badly missing through which Zimbabwe can begin to accept its diversity and realise the value of each and every voice in the community.

Use the clips of Phulu talking about the diversity of languages in Zimbabwe in your own interview. Clip 2a and 2b.

After the political disagreements of the 1970s and 1980s, the current government conducted massacres in your homeland, Matabeleland, between 1983-1985. As being a member of the Ndebele-speaking people, you witnessed the killings when you were a child. How do you remember back to those times?

It was an extermination of the Ndebele and other minority groups. It began in 1983, 3 years after Zimbabwe declared its independence. Mugabe deployed his North Korean-trained special brigade in our provinces and launched the so-called Gukurahundi operation, which means in Shona "the early rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains". Those years brought massive terror resulting in dread, mass killings and torture, mental disabilities and material loss for the people and the region. I was seven at that time. I remember that the soldiers invaded homes, and beat up adults around me on their back and on their tummy with long sticks. My mother and I were taken from the school; she was a teacher at the same school that I attended. We saw people beaten up and heard shots. We were also supposed to be shot. Our lives hung by a hair.

Estimates say more than 20,000 people were murdered, a large number of them being buried in mass graves. The truth has not yet been unfolded, but there have been comprehensive fact-gathering missions on the Gukurahundi. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace collected a massive amount of testimonies and compiled a report about women being raped, people being forced to kill their family members, people being burnt alive in their huts and other violent acts.

Use the clip of Phulu talking about the Gukurahundi in your own interview. Clip 3.

What was the reaction of the government to this report?

Since the end of the Gukurahundi in 1985, no proper acknowledgement has been made by the government. The perpetrators were not taken to justice. Relatives don't know if the victims are buried in a mass grave or are still alive. There was a report commissioned by the government, which up to today has not been made public. In 1987, amnesty was given to dissidents related to the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), which a few months later was extended to all members of the security forces who had committed human rights violations before the Unity Accord of 1987.

The government still abuses people through law enforcement; beating people up is a method of investigation for the police. In order for us to regain influence over our own lives, we are proposing a devolved government, instead of the current centralised one. Having our own provisional assembly in the provinces of Matabeleland would allow us to have a say in our issues - and indeed, it would be well-justified in all other provinces, too. We think that with such a system we could elect our own functionaries. Our language would survive, as we could use it as a medium of communication. We could put policies in place, and ensure the development of our community. Above all, the system of proportional representation in parliament would ensure that minority voices are heard.

Use the clip of Phulu talking about the devolution of power in your own interview. Clip 4.

What do you expect from the upcoming elections?

It has not yet been decided whether the polls will be called this year or postponed to next year. All in all, if we hold elections in the current political climate, I expect rigging, fraud and violence, especially from the ZANU-PF party. If freedom of speech, freedom of movement and freedom of association is allowed, if the election committee is adequately reformed and if it is guaranteed to be a neutral body, and if the Secretariat is made up of people who are able to perform their job without any bias, then I expect fair elections. But there is a lot of 'if' and I don't believe that all those reforms will happen if things continue to go at this pace.

Do any of the parties represent the interests of minority groups?

The current government is made up of 3 political parties, including the ZANU-PF, the MDC-T (Movement for Democratic Change - Tsvangirai) and the MDC-M (Movement for Democratic Change - Mutambara), which are not formed along tribal lines. Parties do not talk explicitly about minority issues, but they still raise issues which resonate with the interests of minorities, e.g. in Matabeleland. We in my organisation have done a lot to sensitise people and civil society organisations to human rights, but minority rights are not on the table. If you raise this issue, you are called a tribalist and you are considered as a divisive figure, not as someone building the bases of a strong democracy.

Use the clips of Phulu talking about upcoming elections and the representation of minorities in your own interview. Clip 5a and 5b.

Is it permitted to nurture traditions?

There are aspects in which the system becomes particularly restrictive, such as the freedom of minority media and the language of education. Even if they have the infrastructure, civil society organisations are not allowed to set up community radio stations, especially if media work is related to tribal identity. A few years ago, a community radio station was forbidden from operating because it had a reference in its name to Tonga. But you need to have access to diverse media in order to sustain your people's identity. Furthermore, how do you nurture your cultural practices if your children are not allowed to learn and write exams in their own languages? The language of education in Zimbabwe is English and there are only two languages taught at school, Shona and Ndebele. In Matabeleland, non-Ndebele speaking young people stick to their mother tongue, but at some point they will be forced to speak Ndebele. On one side, it is good because they become bilingual, but on the other hand, it is a loss that their language is not taught at school.

There is a long way ahead of us. I fear that even a democratically elected new government would not take minority rights seriously. The scope of the definition of democracy does not include minority rights in Zimbabwe. We will still have to fight for our radio stations, for the recognition of minority languages, for the devolution of power and for proportional representation, even after a regime change.

Use the clip of Phulu talking about nurturing traditions in your own interview. Clip 6.

What are the living standards in Matabeleland compared to other regions?

People in Zimbabwe are starving from border to border, from Zambezi to Limpopo, particularly in the rural areas. The unemployment rate is over 90 per cent. Matabeleland lags behind partly because it is an extremely arid region. As a result of unemployment and businesses moving to the capital, Harare, many people, especially the qualified workforce, are seeking jobs in South Africa. Famine prevails and it was reported that near the Botswana border people had to survive on insects because there was nothing to

eat, nothing. We have a challenge in increasing the number of university students. In Bulawayo, the majority of university students arrive from other regions of the country. The number of secondary schools in the region is also low and this is a problem the government should address. But it is an issue we think we could address, if we were given the power to run our own region.

As per development aid, it is distributed among regions in proportion to the population gained on the basis of a census conducted by the central government. However, according to those data, the population is lower in Matabeleland than in reality. The process is obviously rigged so that the government can hold on to more resources. We do not benefit equally either from aid or from the profits from the extraction of raw materials or investments in our region. If you look at the number of dams built in other parts of the country, and the number of dams built in Matabeleland after 1980, the difference is huge.

Use the clip of Phulu talking about the economic situation and development in Matabeleland in your own interview. Clip 7.

Can minorities step up with a unified voice?

There are a lot of tribes living in Matabeleland, besides Ndebele: the Tonga, the Venda, the Kalanga and the Sotho have different languages and an identity they want to foster. Today peoples are unified because they have the same interest to fight for self-governance. But there are some voices among Ndebele speakers that want to blanket all the Matabele peoples with a uniform Ndebele identity. And because there is no culture that recognises diversity, I fear that, if we, the Ndebele, were to govern ourselves, there would be attempts not to recognise the rights of other smaller groupings.

Use the clip of Phulu talking about whether minorities are unified in your own interview. Clip 8.

Use the clip of Phulu talking about the work of human rights civil society organisations in Zimbabwe in your own interview. Clip 9.

The photo exhibition 'Reflections' is hosted by the African-Hungarian Union and Minority Rights Group Europe and can be seen until the 27th March 2011 at Aranytíz Cultural Centre in Budapest. (1051, Arany János u. 10.)

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