

CENTRALISATION OF LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE AUTHORITY IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract: The article engages on purported Zimbabwe centralization of local administrative authority in recent years. The engagement takes place against the background of Zimbabwe having previously made notable inroads in its decentralization reforms earlier on in its history following the end of colonial rule. The article drew from robust document analysis, decentralization theory and the concepts of decentralization and centralization to engage on national government's centralization of local administrative authority in Zimbabwe. The article finds that it is something of a paradox that present-day Zimbabwe appears to be back-peddling after seemingly setting itself voluntarily on a firm path to decentralization of governmental authority and responsibility to the local units of government. In particular, it finds that administrative centralization, fiscal centralization and political centralization are now a common feature of intergovernmental relations in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Decentralization, centralization, local administrative authority, national government, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union which started off with tumultuous events in the 1980s and ended with its dissolution in 1991 was a major geopolitical event that led to significant changes in the global order. Firstly, the dissolution led to the end of the Cold War, and the end of the bipolar geopolitical order. In turn, this led to the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower, and a shift in the balance of power in the world. Secondly, it led to the independence of 15 countries in the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states. Significant movement away from centralized authority and toward greater autonomy and self-governance occurred with the establishment of sovereign states. The collapse is alleged to have demonstrated the dangers of highly centralized political and economic systems. It is said to have also shown that centralized systems can be brittle, inflexible and often fail to adapt to changing circumstances (Acemoglu 2012). Furthermore, the fall of the Soviet Union is said to have led to a renewed interest in market-based approaches to economic development, which tend to be more decentralized. Additionally, the collapse of the Soviet Union is suggested to have increased public interest in democratic systems, which often feature more decentralized political power, with power being shared between the central government and, regional and local governments. It is said that the shift saw countries around the world begin to move away from centralized, top-down models of governance, and adopting more decentralized political systems and developing a greater sense of local autonomy. Furthermore, it is said that the collapse afforded other countries an opportunity to learn from the alleged blunders of centralization and to develop more effective decentralized systems of governance. Since gaining majority independence from Britain on 18 April 1980, Zimbabwe, a landlocked country in Southern

Africa bordered by Zambia to the northwest, Mozambique to the east, South Africa to the south, and Botswana to the southwest, has pursued decentralization reforms (Marumahoko et al. 2023: 69). However, it seems that the nation has been renegeing on this commitment during the last few decades. The article engages on Zimbabwe's centralization of the local administrative authority, even as it claims to be boosting their standing and status as the system of government that enjoys greater proximity to communities in recent years.

Organization and Methodology

The article is structured and organized as follows: introduction, concepts of centralization and decentralization, centralization and decentralization in brief assessment, post-independence efforts at decentralization in Zimbabwe in short, Zimbabwe's decentralized system's dilemma, administrative centralization, fiscal centralization and political centralization. Following this is brief engagement of the adverse effects of centralization on local administrative authority. The article then presents its concluding remarks. The article applied document analysis to analyses national government centralization of local administrative authority in Zimbabwe for three reasons. First, document analysis allowed the article to examine official government documents, such as laws, decrees, and circulars, to understand the legal framework governing centralization and decentralization. This way, document analysis assisted to identify the extent of central control over local administration, Second, analyzing government reports, statistics, and data was deemed suitable for purposes of providing insights into the implementation and impact of centralization policies on local administrations. Third, reviewing meeting minutes, memos, and correspondence between national and local government officials revealed the dynamics of decision-making processes, conflicts and negotiations related to (de)centralization. This provided a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamics at play. By analyzing these documents, the article hopes to gain a deeper understanding of the centralization of local administrative authority and its implications for governance and decision-making processes.

The Concepts of Centralization and Decentralization

Keating (2001) defines centralization as the "concentration of decision-making powers in a single, central body". He notes that centralization can occur in both authoritarian and democratic systems, and that it can take place at all levels of government, from the national to the local level. Additionally, Keating discusses the role of factors such like geography, culture and history in shaping levels of centralization in different societies. Keating argues that geography, culture and history play an important role in shaping levels of centralization. For example, he points out that countries with a small land area and a dense population, like the Netherlands or Belgium, tend to be more centralized than countries with a large land area and more sparse population, like Canada or Australia. Additionally, countries with a strong tradition of central government, like France or Germany, tend to be more centralized than countries with a tradition of local autonomy, like Switzerland or the United States (Keating, 2001). Hix (2008) defines centralization as the "concentration of decision-making authority in a single entity". He argues that centralization can occur at different levels, from the national to the global level, and that it has important implications for democracy, efficiency, and accountability. According to Hix (2008), centralization can have both positive and negative implications for democracy, efficiency and accountability.

On the positive side, centralization can lead to more efficient decision-making and a more consistent approach to policy. However, it can also lead to a lack of transparency and accountability, as power is concentrated in a single entity that is not easily accessible to the public. Decentralization, according to Rondinelli (1981), an early proponent, is the transfer of authority over planning, management, resource sharing, and allocation from the central government and its agencies to the following groups: (a) field units of ministries and agencies under the central government; (b) subordinate units or levels of government; (c) public authorities or corporations with some degree of autonomy; (d) area-wide, regional, or functional authorities; and (e) non-governmental private or voluntary organizations. In the same vein, Watts (1995) defines decentralization as “the transfer of authority and responsibility from the central government to subordinate levels of government”. He distinguishes between two types of decentralization: administrative decentralization, which involves the transfer of decision-making and administration to lower levels of government, and fiscal decentralization, which involves the transfer of financial resources.

While decentralization and centralization appear to represent opposing approaches to the formation of public organizations, Witesman (2020) notes that the two regularly coexist simultaneously in what is sometimes described as a paradoxical tension or a peaceful coexistence. Additionally, according to Witesman (2020), initiatives to change public institutions emphasize more decentralizing factors like marketisation, devolution of power, deconcentrating, and diversity or more centralizing ones like hierarchy, unification, and governance. It is common to accuse public administrators who advocate for structural change of being swayed by certain public values toward centralisation or decentralization. Values like responsiveness, engagement, and creativity are said to support decentralization, whereas values like accountability, power, and efficiency are considered to favor centralized governance. Thus, value-based norms are often expressed in the way public administration structures and procedures are designed. According to a growing body of research, structural reforms are not always seen as swings between two extreme ideal states—fully decentralized or fully centralized. Rather, it is more likely that both centralized and decentralized structures coexist within the same institutions, frequently resulting in a dynamic tension between values (Witesman, 2020).

Decentralization and Recentralization in Brief Appraisal

According to Erk (2014), decentralization is no cure to all governance ills; cautioning the need for common-sense calls for prudence and sober reflection before one embrace decentralization unconditionally. Koeble and Siddle (2014) are of the view that decentralization has failed citizens in South Africa even though its entrenchment in South Africa’s Constitution made local government the foundation of the so-called developmental state. It is charged with the provision of services such as electricity reticulation, refuse collection and water and sanitation services; all of which it is alleged to have struggled to provide. Even then, Erk (2014) is of the view that, it is hard to “imagine a unitary-centralized system bringing better democracy, policy efficiency, development, and growth to ethnically, economically, and democratically diverse societies”. For its part, the World Bank has spent 7.4 billion dollars between 1990 and 2007 in 20 developing ‘countries, promoting decentralization and has been a vocal critic of recentralization of local government in Africa (Independent Evaluation Group, World Bank, 2008; Treisman, 2007).

In its 2019 report, the World Bank provides a detailed analysis of the recentralization of local government in Africa. It examines the effects of this process on service delivery, accountability, and democracy. The report finds that the recentralization of power has had negative consequences for development on the African continent (World Bank, 2019). The report argues that the recentralization has led to a loss of efficiency and accountability, and has stifled local innovation and initiative. In particular, it finds that recentralization has led to a decline in service delivery, as well as a decrease in citizen engagement, and political participation. It also highlights the negative effects of recentralization on the empowerment of women and youth. The World Bank advocates for a return to a more decentralized model of governance, with increased autonomy and control for local governments. The report recommends a number of reforms to improve the decentralization process, including strengthening local government capacity and increasing citizen participation. The report uses a number of countries as case studies, including Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, and Kenya. Nigeria, for example, is presented as a particularly stark example of recentralization, as the country has experienced a dramatic reversal of the decentralization process over the past few decades. Tanzania is presented as a more moderate example, with some recentralization but also some continued decentralization. Ghana and Kenya are presented as examples of countries that maintained a more balanced approach to decentralization.

Mutebi (2014) looks at the case of Uganda where decentralization is said to have led to recentralization. He notes that decentralization reforms in Uganda were implemented in the early 1990s when current President Yoweri Museveni came to power but later unraveled. He finds that recentralization was driven by a number of factors, including political and economic pressures, as well as a lack of support for the reforms from key stakeholders. This, according to Mutebi, has led to a deterioration of service delivery and increased inequality. In the same vein, Lewis (2014) looks at how decentralization reforms have led to recentralization in Uganda. She finds that recentralization has been achieved in Uganda through the proliferation of local administrative units. The creation of these units has allowed the national government to reassert control by creating new units that are dependent on it for funding and other resources. The national government has also 'captured' new and existing units by appointing loyalists to leadership positions and by redistributing resources to areas that support the ruling party. Subnational entities saw the loss of their ability to balance off the center as a result of being unable to handle their additional responsibilities and turning to patronage networks to run their daily operations. This has reportedly led to frustration and disillusionment among local stakeholders and threatens to undermine the overall decentralization process.

Chan (2006), has written about the reversal of decentralization in Zambia. In this regard, Chan looks at the reasons for and consequences of recentralization in Zambia. He argues that recentralization has occurred through a combination of factors, including the economic crisis, the concentration of power in the presidency and the failure of decentralization to deliver on its promises. Fessha and Kirby (2008) underscore the role played by the political, administrative and financial might of the central government in the recentralization of the local units of public administration. These, according to Fessha and Kirby (2008) are shortcuts back to nation-wide politics that have come about as a result of the central government manipulating its political, administrative and financial might to affect how the local units of public administration operate and is usually done to align them with national

government goals and operations. In their article, Dickovic and Eaton (2004) focused on the process of recentralization in Argentina and Brazil, two countries that had previously decentralized their local governments. They argued that the recentralization process was largely driven by the political interests of the national government, rather than by any real need for centralisation. The authors also argued that the recentralization had led to a number of negative consequences, including decreased autonomy for local governments, diminished transparency and declined trust between citizens and their local governments. Dickovic (2011) analyzed the process of decentralization and recentralization in the developing world, with a particular focus on Latin America and Africa. He argued that recentralization is often driven by economic and political factors, such as the desire for greater control over resources and the desire to maintain power. He also examined the role of international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, in shaping recentralization processes. Overall, he found that the experience of recentralization in the developing world has been mixed, with some countries experiencing positive outcomes and others experiencing negative outcomes. For example, he found that in Brazil, the recentralization process has led to improved service delivery and increased efficiency in some areas, but it has also led to increased inequality and a loss of local autonomy. In contrast, in Mexico, he found that the recentralization process has led to increased political stability and economic growth, but it has also led to a decrease in the quality of services and a loss of local autonomy. Dickovic's findings on Africa are a bit more mixed than his findings on Latin America. In some countries, such as Ghana and Uganda, he found that recentralization has led to improved service delivery and increased economic growth. However, in other African countries, such as Nigeria and South Africa, recentralization is said to have been associated with political instability and corruption. Dickovic (2011) argues that the mixed results in Africa can be attributed to a number of factors, including different histories and political systems of each country. Engagement of literature appears to suggest that recentralization of local units of administration is not a so-called third world country issue but is universal. It is also being experienced in the so-called first world countries. Lowndes (2002), for example, examines the trends and motivations behind the centralisation of local government in the UK. She argues that centralisation is driven by the desire of national government to exert greater control over local government, as well as the belief that a centralized approach is more efficient and effective. Lowndes (2002) argues that the British national government has used a variety of mechanisms to control local government, including: the imposition of national targets and performance indicators on local government, the centralisation of funding and decision-making powers, the appointment of national officials to oversee local government operations and the creation of national agencies to manage specific policy areas, such as education and social services. According to Conlan (2011), economic and political factors have played a major role in the recentralization of power in the United States. For example, he argues that the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s led to a loss of faith in the ability of state and local governments to effectively manage their economies. This, in turn, led to a shift towards more centralized control of economic policy at the national level. Additionally, Conlan argues that the political climate of the 1980s and 1990s, with its focus on reducing the size of government, also contributed to recentralization.

Post-Independence Efforts at Decentralization in Zimbabwe in Short

Since attainment of majority independence from Britain on 18 April 1980, Zimbabwe has taken a considerable number of initiatives to advocate, promote and realize decentralization of governance. In 1984, for example, the then Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe issued the Prime Minister's Directive on Decentralization, also known as the Chenga Decree (Government of Zimbabwe, 1984). Essentially, the Directive aimed to devolve power from central government to provincial, district and local government levels, in order to improve service delivery, promote development and increase public participation in governance. The decree also established local councils and provided for the election of local government officials (Government of Zimbabwe, 1984). However, the implementation of the decree was not without controversy as critics argued that it was used to centralize power in the ruling party, ZANU PF and suppress dissent. The Directive was also subject to a number of other criticisms, both at the time of implementation and in subsequent years. Some of the common criticisms were that it was characterized by a lack of consultation (Makumbe, 1998). In this regard, critics argued that the decree imposed without adequate consultation with local communities, and that it did not take into account the unique needs and challenges of different regions. It was also criticized on the basis that it allegedly facilitated political interference. Critics argued that the decree was used to centralize power in the ruling party, and that local government officials were appointed based on their political affiliation rather than their qualifications. Another criticism was that it did not address the underlying issues that led to the need for decentralization in the first place such as corruption, patronage, and the lack of accountability of local government officials. Critics also pointed that the decree did not provide adequate financial resources or technical assistance to local governments, which hampered their ability to deliver services and promote development. Furthermore, some critics argued that the decree led to a duplication of administrative functions, as the central government retained control over some key areas, such as security and public finance.

Nevertheless, in 1985, the national government came up with the Provincial Councils and Administration Act of 1985 to operationalize decentralization of governance from central government to subnational entities (Chigwata and Marumahoko, 2017). The Provincial Councils and Administration Act of 1985 was intended to operationalize the Prime Minister's Directive on Decentralization by establishing provincial councils and district councils as considerably autonomous, elected bodies with specific powers and functions. Under the Provincial Councils and Administration Act of 1985, each of Zimbabwe's 10 provinces was governed by a Provincial Council, which was composed of elected members, appointed members, and ex-officio members. The elected members were directly elected by the residents of the province, while the appointed members were chosen by the President of Zimbabwe and were intended to represent specific interests such as youth, women, and traditional chiefs (Makumbe, 1998). The ex-officio members included the provincial governor and the heads of various government departments (Chigwata and Marumahoko, 2017). The Act also established a system of provincial governors, who were appointed by the President and were for the day-to-day administration of the country's provinces. In terms of functions, the Provincial Councils were responsible for formulating development plans, approving local budgets, and providing input on national policy and legislation (Government of Zimbabwe, 1985). The Act also gave local governments some autonomy in decision-making and resource allocation, including the ability to raise and

spend revenue, develop and implement development plans, and make decisions on issues such as health, education, and infrastructure. The Provincial Councils and Administration Act of 1985 was subject to a number of criticisms, including that it lacked autonomy (Makumbe, 1998). Critics argued that the councils lacked the real autonomy, as the provincial governors had the power to veto council decisions. It was also said that the councils were not directly accountable to the people, as they were appointed and not directly elected (Kurebwa, 2015). In addition, it was said that they were susceptible to corruption, as they were not subject to the same oversight and scrutiny as national-level government bodies.

Despite these criticisms of the decentralization efforts, in 1994, the national government took some steps that arguably contributed towards some concrete realization of decentralizing authority from national government to local government. It undertook a Civil Service Reform and Rationalization Program that boosted decentralization. The Civil Service Reform and Rationalization Programs of 1994 were intended to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Zimbabwe's civil service and to reduce the role of the central government in local affairs (Government of Zimbabwe, 1994). The major advantage of these reforms was the devolution of responsibility, authority, and powers from the national government to local governments. More authority over the distribution of resources and decision-making was granted to local governments. This included the capacity to create and carry out development plans, generate and spend money, and decide on matters pertaining to infrastructure, health care, and education. Local governments were given responsibility for the management and maintenance of primary and secondary schools, the recruitment and management of teachers, and the development of educational policies and plans (Government of Zimbabwe, 1994). They were also given responsibility for the management and maintenance of health facilities, the recruitment and management of health workers, and the delivery of primary health care services. Local governments were also made responsible for the construction and maintenance of local roads, bridges and other public infrastructure (Government of Zimbabwe, 1994). While the Civil Service Reform and Rationalization Programs of 1994 brought some benefits to local government, they also faced a number of shortcomings, including lack of capacity. Many local governments lacked the capacity to deliver the functions that had been transferred to them, particularly in areas such as health and education. In addition, it was said that they encountered funding constraints. They allegedly struggled to raise sufficient revenue to meet their obligations and responsibilities, particularly in the face of declining government grants and the impact of economic sanctions.

In 1996, Zimbabwe adopted the 13 Principles of Decentralization, which set out the national government's policy framework for decentralization (Government of Zimbabwe, 1996). Decentralization was formed as a strategic governance system using these concepts. In adopting the principles, Zimbabwe sought to improve local responsiveness and participation by acknowledging the necessity to disperse authority and decision-making outside the national government. It was hoped that the 13 Principles of Decentralization would give Zimbabwe's government structure greater responsiveness, inclusivity, and effectiveness as well as to provide local governments more autonomy and decision-making capacity (Government of Zimbabwe, 1996). In the same vein, it was hoped that local communities would be able to better handle their own needs and issues as a result of this move away from a centralized governance. It seems to be the case that the implementation

of the 13 Principles of Decentralization in Zimbabwe has been a mixed success, with some areas experiencing positive outcomes and others facing challenges. Successfully implementing them is still a work in progress, requiring ongoing efforts to overcome gaps and strengthen local communities.

In 2013, Zimbabwe adopted a constitution which facilitates constitutional protection of decentralization. The Zimbabwean Constitution of 2013 includes provisions for the devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities to provincial and metropolitan councils and local government authorities (Marumahoko, 2020a). For the first time in the history of the land-locked southern African country, local government divided into rural councils and urban local authorities, was given constitutional elevation and protection. It became a component of the three-tier governmental system recognized in Zimbabwe comprising of national government, provincial and metropolitan councils and local government councils (Marumahoko et al., 2020). This was seen as a significant step towards the decentralization of power in Zimbabwe, and it was intended to address some of the shortcomings of previous decentralization efforts. The Constitution provides for the establishment of provincial and metropolitan councils, which are responsible for the delivery of services and the management of resources at the provincial level. According to the Zimbabwean Constitution of 2013, rural and urban councils play a key role in the devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities (Marumahoko, 2024). Here is a summary of their role: (a) rural councils are responsible for managing and administering local government affairs in the rural areas. This includes the delivery of services such as health, education, and social welfare, as well as the management of local resources such as land, water, and forests and (b) urban councils are responsible for managing and administering local government affairs in urban areas.

Zimbabwe's Decentralized System's Dilemma

In theory, the foregoing developments appear to intensify and facilitate concrete decentralization of governmental powers and responsibilities to subnational government authorities recognized by the Zimbabwean Constitution of 2013. However, the paradox of it is that decentralization has been accompanied by parallel centralisation of powers and responsibilities of local government, appearing to cancel out any perceived progress associated with earlier progressive developments. While the Constitution and legislation have undoubtedly advanced the cause of decentralization in theory, in practice, there is seemingly a sense that the central government has also increased its power over local government, undermining the decentralization effort and unbalancing intergovernmental relations. In this regard, the article engages on three perceived aspects of centralisation that have seemingly become more pronounced at the same time that the country is celebrating the constitutionalizing of local government and adoption of devolution as the system of governmental division of roles and responsibilities seemingly aspired to by the country's vast majority. To achieve this objective, the article confines its engagement to the three issues of (a) administrative centralisation, (b) fiscal centralisation and (c) political centralisation.

Administrative Decentralization

Ostrom (1997) defines administrative centralisation as the “concentration of decision-making authority in a single level or sphere of government, with limited or no delegation

of decision-making authority to lower levels or spheres of government.” Various mechanisms allow national governments to limit local administrative authority, shaping the relationship between different levels of government and influencing decision-making processes at the local level. These include adoption of preemption laws which prohibit local government from enacting laws or regulations on certain topics, mandating certain policies and programs that local governments must implement, and these may come with specific guidelines and requirements, limiting the discretion of local authorities in administering programs according to local needs and priorities, exerting control over local government finances by requiring approval of local budgets or imposing restrictions on spending, maintaining regulatory oversight over local governments, thus ensuring compliance with national laws and regulations and intergovernmental agreements with local governments that dictate the terms of administrative cooperation and through judicial review which may overturn local decisions or policies deemed to be inconsistent with national laws or constitutional principles. Yet another way is through emergency powers. National governments may have the authority to intervene in local governance during emergencies or crises, such as natural disasters or civil unrest. This can involve the suspension of local government functions or the imposition of centralized control to manage the situation, limiting local administrative authority temporarily.

Centralized staff appointment as administrative centralisation in Zimbabwe

Centralized appointment of key local government officials is one of the ways the national government in Zimbabwe can limit the administrative authority of local government. In this regard, the national government has reserved for itself the authority to appoint key local government officials, such as city managers (Marumahoko, 2020b). By controlling these appointments, the national government can influence administrative decisions and limit local autonomy. As a result, the national government has been accused of consolidating power in the hands of the executive branch thereby undermining the autonomy and authority of local governments and other public institutions. Central government’s involvement in the recruitment and dismissal of local government employees is an example of administrative centralisation. When the central government takes control of local human capital management policy decisions, it effectively strips local governments of their autonomy and undermines their ability to make decisions based on local knowledge and circumstances. This can lead to a loss of expertise, a decrease in efficiency, and a lack of responsiveness to the local needs. Moreover, it can create a culture of fear and compliance, where local officials are more concerned with pleasing the central government than with serving the needs of their communities. In Zimbabwe, despite the Constitution protecting the autonomy of local governments and local decisions consistent with the values of decentralization, the national government has maintained significant control over the recruitment and dismissal of local government employees. This has been a source of tension between the central and local governments, as local governments, as local authorities feel that they are not able to make their own personnel decisions and to hold employees accountable for their performance. The central government’s control over local government staffing has been criticized for creating a culture of political patronage and corruption, where appointments are made based on political connections rather than merit (Marumahoko, 2021). This has had negative effects on the effectiveness and efficiency of

local government services, and has been seen as an impediment to local government reform and decentralization efforts.

Fiscal centralisation

Fiscal centralisation of local government responsibilities by the national government may refer to the process where the central or national government retains significant control over financial resources and decision-making authority that would traditionally fall within the purview of local governments. In this setup, the national government plays a dominant role in determining how revenue is collected, allocated, and spent at the local level (Marumahoko and Fessha, 2011). One of the key characteristics of fiscal centralisation in this context may include: (a) the national government collecting the majority of taxes and revenues, leaving local governments with limited authority to raise funds independently. Local governments may rely heavily on transfers from the national government rather than generating revenue locally; (b) the national government determines the allocation of funds to local governments. This may involve formulas or criteria established at the national level to allocate resources among different regions or localities; (c) the national government exercises significant control over local government budgets, often setting strict guidelines or imposing conditions on how funds are to be spent. This can limit the autonomy of local authorities in making spending decisions based on local priorities; (d) the national government may impose specific mandates or responsibilities on local governments without providing adequate funding to cover the associated costs. This can create unfunded mandates, placing financial strain on local authorities and limiting their ability to address local needs effectively; (e) transfers from the national government to local governments play a crucial role in financing local services and infrastructure. However, the terms and conditions attached to these transfers, as well as the amount allocated, are typically determined by the national government. Overall, fiscal centralisation of local government responsibilities by the national government can lead to a concentration of power and resources at the central level, potentially reducing local autonomy, accountability, and responsiveness to local needs (Marumahoko, 2010). It can also contribute to disparities in resource allocation and service delivery across different regions or localities within a country.

Conditional grants as fiscal centralisation in Zimbabwe

In this section, the article focuses on conditional grants to illustrate the point of the national government in Zimbabwe exerting firm control over local governments through fiscal centralisation. Conditional grants are one of the ways that central government uses to achieve fiscal centralisation and assume control over local decision-making and policies (Marumahoko and Fessha, 2011). Conditional grants are funds provided by a higher level of government (e.g. national governments) to a lower level of government (e.g., local governments) for specific purposes, with conditions attached (Marumahoko, 2010). Road maintenance grants, healthcare grants, education grants and water and sanitation grants are four examples of the conditional grants provided to local government in Zimbabwe. These funds which come in the form of financial assistance to local governments are tied to specific purposes or projects. These grants may come with requirements, such as matching funds or compliance with national policies, limiting the discretion of local authorities. In Zimbabwe, the national government limits the discretion of local government through conditional grants in several ways. To begin with, conditional grants are earmarked for

certain projects or programs, leaving local governments with little flexibility to reallocate funds. The grants are also tied to specific performance metrics, requiring local government to meet certain standards or targets. Local governments must submit detailed reports on grant usage and progress, ensuring accountability and compliance. Related to this, the national government exercises oversight over local governments, monitoring grant usage and enforcing compliance with conditions. In this sense, the conditional grants reduce the autonomy of local governments, as they must adhere to national priorities and guidelines (Marumahoko, 2010). Local governments rely heavily on conditional grants, limiting their ability to make independent decisions. Added to this, national regulations and guidelines govern the use of conditional grants, constraining local governments' discretion. Conditional grants for water and sanitation projects for example, require local governments to use specific technologies, adhere to national water standards, and connect a certain number of households to water and sanitation services. These grants ensure that local governments align with national priorities and meet specific conditions, limiting their discretion and autonomy. By imposing these conditions, the national government in Zimbabwe can influence local government decision-making, ensuring alignment with national priorities and limiting local autonomy.

Political centralisation

Political centralisation refers to the concentration of power, authority, and decision-making within a single or limited number of governing bodies or institutions at the national or central level of government (Hobbes, 1651; Fukuyama, 2011). In a politically centralized system, the central government holds significant control over various aspects of governance, including legislation, policy-making, administration, and resource allocation, often at the expense of regional or local autonomy. The key features of political centralisation include, centralized decision-making in which political authority is vested primarily in the central government, which makes decisions on behalf of the entire country or state, national government exerting control over subnational entities, such as provinces, states, or regions through appointing officials, setting budgets, or imposing conditions on local governance to ensure compliance with national priorities, centralized governments controlling the allocation of resources, including financial resources, infrastructure projects, and public services, national governments retaining the authority to make important political decisions that impact local or regional jurisdictions including matters such as approving local laws, appointing key officials, or determining local government structures, financial dependence in which national governments often control the distribution of funds to local governments through grants, subsidies, or revenue-sharing mechanisms and national governments having the authority to declare a state of emergency in local jurisdictions, allowing them to suspend local government functions and imposing centralized control during crises or emergencies thereby effectively sidelining local political authority in favor of national governance. By controlling these resources, national governments can limit the political authority of local governments and influence their priorities and decisions. These mechanisms enable national governments to maintain a degree of control over local political authority, shaping the relationship between different levels of government and ensuring compliance with national policies and objectives.

Reservation of decision-making authority as political centralization in Zimbabwe

By focusing on national government's reservation of the authority to make significant political decisions that affect local jurisdictions, one can get a sense of how political centralisation is potentially exploited to limit the administrative authority of local government in Zimbabwe. The national government reserves for itself the authority to make significant political decisions that affect local administrative authority through various means. Among others, the national constitution grants the central government powers to make legislate and regulate matters of national importance, which may override local autonomy. The Parliament of Zimbabwe may pass laws that delegate or limit the powers of local government, ensuring central control. The national courts can also review and overturn local decisions deemed inconsistent with national laws and policies. The national government of Zimbabwe can also issue executive orders, directives, or circulars that guide local administrations on implementing local policies and programs (Marumahoko, 2023). These actions can erode local autonomy, undermining the principles of decentralisation and potentially leading to conflicts between national and local governments. These mechanisms also enable national government to maintain authority over local administrative processes, seemingly balancing centralised control with decentralised decision-making.

Negative implications of centralizing local administrative authority

Centralizing local government authority under the national government can have several negative implications (Moyo and Ncube, 2014). Among others, centralized decision-making processes tend to prioritize uniformity and consistency across regions, leading to the imposition of rigid policies and regulations that leave little room for adaptation or experimentation at the local level (Marumahoko, 2023). This limited flexibility can stifle innovation by constraining local governments' ability to implement creative solutions that respond dynamically to local conditions and changing circumstances. In the same vein, centralizing local administrative authority tends to inhibit local experimentation. The point here is that local governments are often incubators of innovation, as they are more attuned to the unique challenges and opportunities within their jurisdictions. However, centralization may discourage local experimentation by imposing top-down mandates and bureaucratic hurdles that discourage risk-taking and innovation. Local leaders may be hesitant to deviate from centralized directives for fear of reprisal or non-compliance, inhibiting their ability to explore innovative approaches to addressing local issues. A related observation is that it tends to ignore local knowledge. It is argued that centralization can overlook the valuable insights and expertise of local stakeholders who possess firsthand knowledge of their communities' needs, assets, and capabilities (Saunders, 2019). Decisions made at the national level may rely on generalized assumptions and data that fail to capture the nuances of local contexts. As a result, centralized policies may disregard local knowledge and preferences, leading to solutions that are out of touch with the realities on the ground and less effective in achieving desired outcomes.

Conclusion

The article engaged on the issue of national government's centralization of local administrative authority in Zimbabwe after noting that it is an area of academic significance that is far from being fully scrutinized. It began by providing global context to the issue of enquiry. In this regard, in its introductory remarks, it linked the collapse of the Soviet Union

to the emergence of decentralization efforts globally. Thereafter, it engaged on the concepts decentralization and centralization with the objectives of realizing definitional certainty and situating the discussion in the appropriate parameters. This was followed by debates and discussions on decentralization. In this regard, the article sought to engage on prior research whose basis could be used to generate relevant additional research outputs. It then explored the basis of Zimbabwe's decentralization efforts, noting that earlier on the country seemingly set itself on a robust path to decentralization and now appeared to be back-peddling on that effort. It then engaged on three aspects of centralization, namely, (a) administrative centralization, (b) fiscal centralization and (c) political centralization to illustrate the point of increased centralization of local administrative authority. Following this, it engaged on the negative effects of centralization, after which it presented its concluding remarks. The common observation is that centralization is a phenomenon permeating central-local relations in present-day Zimbabwe and is on the ascendancy. Additional research might be useful in exploring how local government has responded to national government chipping away on local administrative authority.

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