

Fragility of a Church-Civil Society Marriage in Zimbabwe: The Case of the National Convergence Platform

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Abstract

This article gives a historical account of the church and civil society in Zimbabwe's efforts to influence national dialogue through the National Convergence Platform (NCP). It applies Jean-Jacques Rousseau's version of Social Contract Theory to analyze the relational dynamics in the NCP. Methodologically, qualitative data were collected through a review of the NCP's strategic documents, media reports, public statements of the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD), and academic materials available on the Internet. Data collected through key informant interviews for a separate project were also utilized, and my insider perspective further informed the article. It was found that the working relationship between the church and civil society was marred by mistrust and competition for leadership of national dialogue processes. Thus, while an application of Social Contract Theory helped, it failed to explain other relational dynamics that manifested among personalities in the NCP. The article recommends strengthening relations before concrete structures are established by the church and civil society.

Keywords: Social Contract, National Dialogue, Church, Civil Society

Introduction

Zimbabwe's social, economic and political challenges continued to affect the country at all levels of society for more than two decades (Mhlanga and Ndhlovu, 2021). Over the years, various actors, including the government, churches, and civil society, called for national dialogue to resolve the country's national question. While the government did so, the loudest voice came from the non-state actors, namely the church and civil society. This article regards the church as an independent entity of civil society. Thus, it indirectly agrees with the perspective of Patrick (2025) that the church is independent of civil society; yet, the former's role has evolved to resemble that of the latter. It is outside the scope of this article to further discuss the definitions of a church and civil society.

In Zimbabwe, collaborations between the church and civil society dominated much of the public space in nation-building processes since the early 2000s. National dialogue gained prominence as the potential solution to Zimbabwe after the military's overthrow of President Robert Mugabe in 2017 (Heal Zimbabwe Trust, 2019). Yet, the working relationship between

the church and civil society remained fragile, thereby affecting progress in national dialogue efforts. The social capital resident in the church and civil society has not been fully employed in Zimbabwe.

National dialogues are becoming increasingly popular as tools for conflict resolution worldwide. This article contributes to the national dialogue discourse in Zimbabwe through the application of the Social Contract Theory. It focuses on the relationship that existed between the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) (the church) and the civil society organizations under the auspices of the National Convergence Platform (NCP). The ZHOCD is an ecumenical body in Zimbabwe comprising the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC), and the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe and Africa (UDACIZA). The article attempts to address the relational challenges that affect national dialogue initiatives in Zimbabwe, with particular focus on non-state actors. The fragility of the church-civil society nexus in national dialogue has not given room to a sustainable national dialogue, thereby contributing to the country's continued social, economic and political challenges. This article therefore argues that the NCP was a missed opportunity for the church and civil society to influence transformation in Zimbabwe through national dialogue. It gives a historical narrative of the major events that manifested a fragile relationship between the church and civil society and concludes by offering practical recommendations to the church and civil society in their future collaborative efforts on national dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

The article is informed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's version of Social Contract Theory. It acknowledges that the theory is associated with several classical philosophers such as Plato and Socrates, modern philosophers like Thomas Hobbes (1651), John Locke (1690) and Rousseau (1762), and was further refined by more recent philosophers such as John Rawls (1971) and David Gauthier (1977), among others. Nonetheless, for this article, Rousseau's description of the social contract is considered, particularly his normative version of the theory. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2025) describes the social contract versions of several classical and modern philosophers, including those listed earlier.

Social Contract Theory posits that persons' moral and political obligations are dependent on a contract, or pact, among them to form a society in which they live (Friend, 2025). For Rousseau, the social contract entails individuals coming together to collectively work toward everyone's freedom. Thus, the only way to regain freedom is for individuals to submit their particular wills to the collective or general will established through a pact with other free and equal persons (Friend, 2025). By doing so, a society or sovereign would have been formed. Individual rights and freedoms are renounced by being in a collective group. A new body or sovereign is formed to generate good for all. Individual wills are directed toward individual interests. Nevertheless, the general will, once the sovereign is formed, is aimed at a common goal, understanding, and agreed upon collectively for the good of all. Rousseau also argues that in a social contract, there is a reciprocation of duties. The sovereign is committed to the good of individual members; thus, each individual is also expected to pursue the good of the whole body. Therefore, individuals cannot be allowed to freely decide on their interests. They are obliged to fulfil their duties in the interest of the sovereign. The individual members cannot reap the benefits of citizenship accrued by being part of the sovereign when they are not prepared to contribute their part. Friend (2025) argues that they must be "forced to be free," meaning that individuals should conform themselves to the general will.

Rousseau's conceptualization of the social contract amplifies the tenets of democracy.

He indicates that the general will depends on the periodic coming together of the entire sovereign; every member has the power to decide on issues and contribute to the final decision. Thus, members of the sovereign body are decision makers. While conditions of a true democracy are stringent, according to Rousseau, they are the only prerequisite for citizens to save themselves and regain the freedom they are naturally entitled to (Friend, 2025). Therefore, citizens have the opportunity to overcome the corruption brought about by social developments that destroyed the State of Nature, which provided peace, adequate resources, and freedom. The citizens can reconstitute themselves politically along strong democratic principles, which is good for them as individuals and collectively as a society. Generally, the Social Contract Theory helps to explain the origin of the state. But, it can also be used to explain relations in an institution as it does in this article.

The theory has been subjected to criticism mainly from feminists and race-conscious scholars. They argue that the theory failed to raise the plight of women socially, politically, and economically. The social contract is also criticized for assuming that the individual entering the contract is universal and representative of all members of the society. The 'economic man' entering the contract does not seem to take into cognizance the plight of women and children. The 'liberal individual' who enters into the contract is also presented as universally representative of all human beings, classless, sexless, and races; hence, this has been challenged by feminist philosophers. Nevertheless, the current study did not look at the church-civil society relations in national dialogues from a gender, race, and class perspective; thus, the noted limitations of the theory did not affect the article's findings.

Therefore, the coming together of the ZHOCD and civil society in 2019 to form the NCP and the subsequent programs before the eventual collapse of the platform can be understood within the confines of Rousseau's Social Contract Theory. The NCP was a platform established to host deliberations on the social, economic and political challenges affecting Zimbabwe. It therefore brought together the following organizations under the ZHOCD banner: ZCBC, EFZ, UDACIZA, and ZCC. The civil society participated in the platform through its various apex bodies' representation which included the Citizen Manifesto, the National Association of Societies for the Care of the Handicapped, the National Transitional Justice Working Group, the Platform for Concerned Citizens (PCC), the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), and the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum. These institutions formally endorsed the NCP. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network and Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe joined the NCP in 2020.

Research Methodology

I provide a chronological narrative of the key events that led to the formation of the NCP before critically examining the factors that led to its collapse through the lens of the Social Contract Theory. The key questions examined here are the following: What is a national dialogue? What went wrong in the NCP? How can the Social Contract Theory help to explain the relationship between the church and civil society in Zimbabwe? To answer these questions, a comprehensive literature review was done, targeted at the NCP strategic and programmatic materials, public statements of the church and the NCPs, media reports, Internet materials on national dialogues, and academic work on the subject.

Also, data collected through key 25 informant interviews for a separate project that analyzed the church-led national dialogue initiatives in Zimbabwe were also utilized for the current article. In that separate study, church leaders, former members of the NCP, and representatives of the political parties were interviewed. I was a member of the ZHOCD Secretariat from 2017 to 2022, and was central in the implementation of the national dialogues; thus, my 'insider' perspective was also critical in the development of this article.

To counter possibilities of bias, my perspectives were confirmed through interviews of other NCP members from the civil society that directly opposed the church's approaches. My emotions related to my role in the NCP were not allowed to determine the study's results. The methodology was qualitative, since people's opinions were shared and analyzed through the content analysis method.

Understanding National Dialogues

National dialogues are a critical approach to resolving national challenges. The tool has become popular in the world, even in areas with non-violent conflicts. National dialogues provide potential for meaningful conversations about the underlying drivers of conflict and ways to holistically resolve them (Stigant and Murray, 2015). Planta et al. define national dialogue as an "attempt to bring together all relevant national stakeholders and actors (both state and non-state), based on a broad mandate to foster nationwide consensus concerning key conflict issues" (2015,4). The definition indicates that national dialogues are useful for the promotion of public participation and helping develop a new social contract in a country. The Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation (KNDR), for instance, became a platform for crisis management before it morphed into a more broad-based process (Melese, 2022).

Principles of National Dialogue

Citing Guo et al. (2015), Paffenholz, Zachariassen and Helfer (2017), Murray and Stigant (2021), and Mandikwaza (2024) advise that the key factors for national dialogues to be successful include clarity of objectives, adequate political will, credible convenorship, inclusivity, public participation, transparency, implementation strategies, deadlock-breaking mechanisms, as well as predictable and adequate financial support. It is critical to note that each country's circumstances are unique. Nevertheless, it can generally be argued that there is a higher likelihood of success of national dialogues if certain principles are followed. National dialogues should incorporate inclusion, transparency, public participation, a far-reaching agenda, a credible convener, appropriate and clear rules of procedure, and an implementation plan. These principles can collectively or individually make or break a national dialogue. This means that national dialogues' main characteristics are that they are participatory and inclusive.

There is an assumption that inclusivity leads to better results of national dialogues. But, Planta et al. (2015) caution that there is a need to critically consider the challenges and dilemmas that emerge with increased social inclusivity in national dialogues. Stigant and Murray (2015) also add that an inclusive dialogue can risk losing legitimacy if there are insufficient opportunities for the public to remain informed about and feed into the dialogue. Thus, transparency and public participation can be guaranteed by connecting local engagements to national-level dialogues. Kenya's 2004 Bomas Constitutional Reform Conference and Senegal's 2008-2009 Assies Nationales (national dialogue) are good examples of transparent national dialogues.. The Senegalese example also indicates that the Diaspora from France, Canada, and the United States was also consulted. The conveners should also be credible and acceptable to the public. The national dialogue of Tunisia in 2013 was successful because the four institutions that led the process were credible and widely accepted by the citizens, namely (1) the General Workers' Union, (2) the Employers' Union, (3) the Tunisia Bar Association, and (4) the Tunisia League for Human Rights (Stigant and Murray, 2015). This thus guaranteed the acceptance of the national dialogue.

While these principles can be a major factor, it is also important to consider what happens after an agreement has been reached. The Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative

(2017) notes that while most of the national dialogues studied reached agreements, half of the cases failed to implement those agreements or only implemented them to a limited degree. It lists the factors that can affect the implementation of the agreement. The political contextual factors include national elite and the public's attitude, regional and international support or lack of it, local dialogue expertise, and experiences from previous national dialogue initiatives.

Mandikwaza (2024) indicates that dialogues are referred to as 'national' if they are nationally-owned processes established to address national challenges such as political, social and economic crises. He further posits that they are called national if they address issues of national significance to reach amicable consensus-based solutions. Yet, Mandikwaza (2024) also laments the absence of a theoretical framework for explaining the assumptions behind the national dialogues. Nevertheless, Mandikwaza filled that gap by developing a national dialogue framework that allows for an application of social contract, conflict transformation, and consociational theories. Thus, this article complements Mandikwaza's contribution to the conversations on Zimbabwe's national dialogues.

The Church and Civil Society in Zimbabwe

The church in Zimbabwe is generally defined through membership in ecumenical bodies (Vengesai, 2021). Four major ecumenical bodies exist according to Vengesai. The first one is the Roman Catholic Church, with its arms such as the Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), ZCBC, and the National Movement of Catholic Students (NMCS). The second category is the African Independent Churches (AIC) represented by several para-church organizations and networks, including the UDACIZA. The third group is the Evangelical Churches (EC), which include the ZCC, Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA), and the EFZ. Vengesai (2021) notes the fourth category as the Pentecostal Churches (PC), which include the National Pastors Conference (NPC, Zimbabwe Council of Pentecostal Churches (ZCPC), Christian Leaders Forum (CLF), Zimbabwe Divine Destiny (ZDD), and others. Nonetheless, the fifth body was established in 2019, namely the Zimbabwe Indigenous Interdenominational Council of Churches (ZIICC) with varying membership to directly counter the NCP, according to a key informant interviewed. Thus, this article refers to these church groups collectively as the "church."

On its part, the civil society in Zimbabwe is not homogeneous. It is made up of different actors focusing on specific issues of concern. Masunungure (2014) critically appraises civil society in Zimbabwe after the 2013 elections and interrogates what its proper role should be in the democratization of the country. Citing the World Bank (2008), Masunungure shows how the civil society's changing roles can be understood by focusing on civic actors' risks and opportunities. This informs feasible and realistic expectations of what the civil society can achieve through various courses of action. I do not agree with Masunungure (2014) on categorizing the ZCC and CCJP as part of what he characterizes as the first generation of civil society actors focused on humanitarian issues. While these faith-based organizations played a complementary role to that of the government, with less confrontation, during the period under review, they did not take a back stage. Yet, the civil society in Zimbabwe became more radical and confrontational after 2000. Cited in Masunungure (2014), Mair and Sithole said the following:

The growing inability of the government to provide social services, the increasing corruption in the government coupled with rising repression, the failure and social costs of economic reform initiated a wave of NGO start-ups the majority of them pursuing a political agenda, forced the established

interest groups into politics and confrontation with the government and made the trade unions the backbone of the newly formed opposition movement. The uniting and mobilising issues for this heterogeneous coalition were constitutional reform and, later, the removal of Mugabe from power. The lead agency in the latter became the MDC (2002: 11-12).

The aforementioned period saw the emergence of several organizations focusing on legal assistance, election observation, constitutional reforms, peace, residents' issues, and research. It is outside the scope of the current article to discuss the work done by individual organizations. Nonetheless, reference is made to individual civic organizations that worked with the church from 2017 onward, namely Citizen Manifesto (CM), the National Association of Societies for the Care of the Handicapped (NASCOH), the National Transitional Justice Working Group (NTJWG), the Platform for Concerned Citizens (PCC), the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (ZHRGF), the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), and the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ). These organizations constitute what I regard in this article as civil society.

The Church and the National Question

In 2006, the Heads of Christian Denominations (HOCD), made up of the ZCC, EFZ, and ZCBC, produced a signature document called the "Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe," Marking a historic contribution of the church to national dialogue. The three ecumenical bodies defined the national challenges through posing a critical question: "Where did we as a nation go wrong?" The document then discusses the contemporary social, economic and political situations affecting the country (HOCD, 2006). Lack of a national shared vision, the need for a homegrown constitution, corruption, land redistribution, legal reforms, economic mismanagement, international isolation, and a disjointed church voice on national issues were noted as specific issues of concern. The church called for national conventions on the national question.

On the eve of the political transition in Zimbabwe in 2017, the church under the newly branded ecumenical network, ZHOCD, made up of ZCC, EFZ, ZCBC, and the addition of UDACIZA, issued a compelling pastoral statement (ZHOCD, 2017). The statement called for the establishment of a national envisioning platform. The church saw the transition as a crisis moment and an opportunity for the renewal of the nation, as it cited Luke 19:41-44. The statement read as follows: "We have reached a new chapter in the history of our nation." It iterated that "Our God created everything out of chaos." Most importantly, the statement defined the national problem as a loss of trust which manifested through economic and social challenges and had been brewing over time, leading to the loss of trust in national processes and institutions. It then touched on many issues that were previously covered in the church document of 2006. This characterization of the national question was sustained by the church until 2019 when its efforts were combined with those of civil society. The ZHOCD established itself as a major stakeholder and participant in the socioeconomic and political spheres of Zimbabwe through various engagement platforms and initiatives (ZCC 2021-2023 Strategic Plan). The mandate of the Church in Zimbabwe is well captured in the "Call for National Consensus" (ZHOCD, 2021).

Conceptualization of the National Question by Non-state Actors

On November 24, 2017, the day President Emerson Mnangagwa was sworn in as the new President of Zimbabwe following the intervention of the military, the non-state actors,

including the churches, convened the National People's Convention (NCP) to deliberate on the national problems in light of the new administration. The outcome of the meeting, attended by over 4,000 people (Nyathi, 2017), was a declaration that listed the key challenges the new administration needed to address. The non-state actors acknowledged that the country was at crossroads despite the new political arrangement. The problem was viewed as manifesting in divisive politics; lack of free, fair and credible elections; political violence; lack of rule of law; marginalized women and youth; deteriorating education system; economic stagnation; corruption; international isolation; human rights violations; and lack of constitutionalism, as well as lack of social cohesion due to past hurts that were not healed (Nyathi, 2017). The President was urged to quickly address the matters.

Critical for the current article is the fact that the declaration of the definition of the national problem was made by both the church and civil society. This marked the beginning of the collaboration between the two institutions on addressing the national question through national dialogue. By 2020, civil society, notably the PCC, had perfected its definition of the problem, arguing that the previous dialogue initiatives "did not address the fundamental problem: the politics and the lack of a genuine, people-centered social contract" (Mandaza and Reeler, 2020, 1). Such conceptualization of the root cause could not be taken lightly by the government, which viewed it as a political statement to discredit the ruling party and support the opposition parties' arguments around the legitimacy of President Mnangagwa's administration.

The Sabbath Call Proposal

In 2019, the ZHOCD continued to reflect on the national question and the possible solutions. This process culminated in the ZHOCD proposing suspension of elections for seven years through what it called the "Sabbath Call Proposal" (Mujinga, 2023). Suspension of all political contestations for "seven years," during which the country would have to address all the noted challenges, was proposed, not in a prescriptive way. The proposal was officially publicized on October 7, 2019 in Harare by the ZHOCD leadership (EFZ, 2019). The proposal was received with mixed feelings by the public and the church members.

The ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), activists openly attacked the church, arguing that the proposal was not constitutional. The main opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC-A), also felt that the church was advocating for an unconstitutional process that would extend an "illegitimate administration's term." On October 19, 2019, President Mnangagwa responded to the proposal, directly rejecting it, arguing that it was meant to rescue Nelson Chamisa, who he described in the letter as an "ungracious loser" (Mnangagwa, 2019). President Mnangagwa also challenged the ZHOCD's interpretation of the Seven Days Theology, arguing that the church had missed it. Chamisa diplomatically rejected the proposal. He argued that the church's proposal violated the national constitution and the values of his party (Chamisa, 2019). While key political actors rejected the proposal in 2019, some of them regretted having done so when the 2023 elections were held without any meaningful electoral reforms having been instituted (Makwara and Gumbo, 2023).

Church-Civil Society Collaboration

The foundations established by the NPC in 2017 were strong enough to be sustained by the church and civil society. Yet, the two actors had not formally connected their interventions around the national dialogue project as parallel efforts continued. Nonetheless, it was clear that the church had adopted its unique approaches to addressing the national challenges. The

ZHOCD continued to issue “analytical and objective pastoral and prophetic statements” (ZHOCD, 2021). Its message was consistent, calling the nation to “a broad-based and comprehensive national dialogue to address the national challenges. The statements were accompanied by countless formal and informal engagements with state and non-state actors to motivate political willingness and broad-based understanding of the necessity for national dialogue” (ZCC 2021-2023, 1).

The previous national dialogue initiatives in Zimbabwe, including the Lancaster House (1979) that facilitated the country’s independence, the Unity Accord (1987), and the Global Political Agreement (2008) which led to the Government of National Unity and others were criticized for being elitist and lacking inclusivity and comprehensiveness, thereby becoming mere negotiation platforms (Gumbo and Shava, 2021). Therefore, to address such gaps, the ZHOCD advocated for an inclusive, broad-based, comprehensive and transformative national dialogue. In its approach, the ZHOCD identified civil society as a major stakeholder. Thus, efforts were made to build convergence with civil society on the nature of the national problem and strategies of national dialogue (Gumbo and Shava, 2021).

After the publication of the Sabbath Call Proposal, it was widely discussed in public, private, and academic spaces in the context of national dialogue (Mujinga, 2023). The civil society leadership engaged the ZHOCD to reflect on the proposal. This resulted in the adoption of the National Convergence Platform (NCP). The ZHOCD remained the convener of the reflection meetings under the NCP before it was launched on December 13, 2019 in Harare. It became a platform to host deliberations on social, economic and political challenges. The participating civic organizations that became members of the NCP are the CM), NASCOH, NTJWG, PCC, ZCTU, ZHRNF, ZESN, WCoZ, as well as other individual academics and activists.

The ZHOCD assumed the secretariat and chair of the NCP while other apex bodies led technical committees formed to spearhead the national dialogue on specific issues such as national healing, constitutionalism and elections, economy and social contract, and humanitarian and international relations. The technical committees were tasked with the role of leading conversations on the challenges noted by the church and civil society separately and collectively over the years. The problems had also been identified by the ZHOCD in the Sabbath Call Proposal and the non-state actors (including the church) during the NPC in 2017.

Promising a Church-Civil Society Marriage

The early days of the NCP were promising, with regular and periodic meetings held. The nation had been mobilized for a national dialogue led by the non-state actors with the hope of engaging the state at a later stage. The launch event had been attended by other critical actors such as the traditional leaders and independent commissions who had been engaged separately on specific issues by the ZHOCD. It was generally agreed that the church would lead the convening of the dialogues, with civil society contributing to the process through the technical committees. This followed the successful convening of the National Leaders Prayer Breakfast Meeting by the ZHOCD on February 7, 2019 in Harare, which was attended by over 700 people from political parties, civil society, the diplomatic community, student associations, and other sectors. But, President Mnangagwa apologized for not being able to attend at the last minute, although his party was well represented (Jesuit Communications, 2019). This event convinced the civil society that the church could lead the national dialogue.

In May of 2020, the NCP issued the “Call for a Comprehensive National Settlement” statement that elaborated on the background of the NCP (NCP, 2020, cited in Mandaza and Reeler). It indicated the following:

The NCP emerged from the inspirational, bold, and compelling call by the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) on the 7th of October 2019. This Sabbath Call, as it was called, was an open invitation to nudge the nation to find a permanent solution to the myriad of problems that had affected the nation, some for almost 40 years. In its engagement with the Sabbath Call and other solutions proffered by different actors, the NCP concurred (Mandaza and Reeler, 2020, 1).

The NCP reiterated what the Sabbath Call Proposal had captured as the main challenges: that (a) the nation was deeply divided to the point of paralysis with no hope of sharing a common vision in light of the hurts of the past and the insecurities they created; (b) the nation was failing to establish itself as a constitutional democracy with so much mistrust of the state institutions accused of political capture and the failure to find the mutually agreed process to implement the 2013 constitution; (c) the national economy had virtually collapsed due to corruption, capture by the cartels, policy inconsistency, resulting in deepening poverty and vulnerability of the highest number of citizens; (d) due to the preceding aspects, the nation lacked sufficient preparedness in the face of any natural or human disaster. The statement also noted that the last problem was demonstrated in the government's dealing with the three recent humanitarian disasters: (1) the drought, (2) Cyclone Idai, and the Coronavirus Disease (COVID)-2019. The statement further demonstrated the convergence built between the church and civil society.

The definition of the problem, however, resonated with that of the opposition political parties, something that generated discomfort in government corridors. Nevertheless, the opposition political parties traced the root cause to the failure of the political leaders whose legitimacy they contested (Chamisa, 2019). This was in contrast to the conceptualization of the root causes presented by the ZHOCD. The church emphasized the complexity and interconnectedness of the root causes of the problems. The 2018 election outcomes were contested in courts before President Mnangagwa was declared the winner. Thus, his legitimacy remained a major issue with the opposition political parties. This was emphasized by two politicians interviewed for a separate process (Interviews, April 26, 2025). The view explains why President Mnangagwa responded by forming the Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD) in the name of the urgency for national dialogue, argued one of the opposition politicians. Yet, he aimed to gain political legitimacy from the several fringe political parties that participated in the presidential race in 2018 (Kairiza, 2023). But, the leader of the main opposition party, the MDC-A, did not join the POLAD, thereby further generating perception problems for the ZHOCD and the civil society, which were viewed as pursuing the regime change agenda. The POLAD was convened by the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC). Nonetheless, the platform never gained public confidence.

Mistrust Developed in the NCP

Mistrust between the elements of the ZHOCD and some members of the NCP became evident. The NCP was made up of heterogeneous members who had different backgrounds and beliefs. While it was meant to foster convergence on the nature of the national question and approaches to resolving it, the NCP members sustained varying strategies. I, as an insider, noted that the ZHOCD was pursuing non-confrontational and persuasive approaches; yet, elements in the civil society were advocating for a more radical way of engaging the government. Through the Sabbath Call Proposal, the ZHOCD envisaged a period of suspension of elections during which the citizens would address the problems noted in the

call. The ZHOCD was not prescriptive on who would lead the country during that moment of “sabbath” (Gumbo and Shava, 2021). Nevertheless, the PCC, an active member of the NCP, was pushing for an NTA to lead the country in the meantime, as noted earlier. The PCC was the Chairperson of the NCP International Relations Committee. The ZCC occupied the General Secretary’s position of the NCP while it also chaired the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISA). Thus, in early December of 2019, FOCCISA met President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa over the continued deterioration of the Zimbabwean situation. The FOCCISA received solidarity support from the World Council of Churches (WCC). The PCC contested the move by the church. This concern was sustained until relations broke down in the NCP.

Former South African President Thabo Mbeki, later visited Zimbabwe in a move that was linked to the FOCCISA and WCC initiative. Sicetsha cites Mbeki as having said the following: “We all have a responsibility to help one another to the extent that we can do anything we can to assist brethren, the government, and the country. I am very glad indeed with what the president and the country are doing to respond to the challenges, and I think it’s very important that the region comes behind the president and the country because the challenges of Zimbabwe are our challenges” (2019, 1).

Mbeki further urged the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to engage Western countries for the removal of the targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe. He also met Chamisa and representatives of the non-state actors. The mistrust in the NCP further manifested in the manner members engaged President Mbeki. Thus, relations among and individual members of the NCP continued to deteriorate.

In the middle of the mistrust within the NCP, on September 3, 2020, the NCP issued a communique to the South African Convoy. It indicated the following:

The NCP welcomes the engagement of the South African government with the Zimbabwe crisis, as well as noting the attention to Zimbabwe by the African Union. These are timely and deeply needed at this point in Zimbabwe’s history. Following the release of the SABBATH call by the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations in October 2019, the launch of the NCP in December 2019, and the creation of the Council of the NCP in January 2020, the National Council calls for a Comprehensive National Settlement to address the escalating national crisis. In the same communication, the NCP called for an immediate cessation of all violence and hate speech as necessary preconditions to national peace. The NCP believed that the crisis could be addressed effectively through a comprehensive national dialogue process (NCP, 2020, 1).

On February 2, 2021, the ZHOCD issued a compelling proposal to the nation titled “National Consensus Call,” which called for the nation to reflect on the key challenges outlined in the church’s previously shared documents. As anticipated, members of the NCP from the civil society side openly criticized the ZHOCD, arguing that the latter was now exhibiting signs of exclusivity in its approach by “leaving out other critical players.” The PCC wrote a letter to the ZHOCD raising concerns about the ZHOCD’s pastoral statement. The PCC also revived its advocacy for a parallel process that called for the NTA. Nevertheless, the ZHOCD held that its recommendation in the Sabbath Call Proposal did not include prescriptions for a structure to lead the country while the national dialogue was underway. This development marked the death of the NCP spirit. No further meeting was held after this deadlock. Arguing for the NTA, after the issuance of a public statement by the NCP earlier in 2020, the co-conveners of the PCC had this to say:

Since 2016, the Platform for Concerned Citizens (PCC) has argued consistently for a process leading to the establishment of a National Transitional Authority (NTA). We have done this for no ulterior motive, despite the insinuations that there was a political motivation behind the PCC, but in the realisation that the national crisis then, and even more so now in the COVID-19 crisis, required a broad national effort to avoid what we termed a “hard landing” (Mandaza and Reeler, 2020, 1),

The preceding statement shows that even though the PCC was an active and strategic member of the NCP, it did not submit to the general will of the sovereign (NCP). It sustained its individual will and, in doing that, it attracted the support of some of the NCP members such as the CM. But, other civil society members stood by the leadership of the ZHOCD. These included those working on elections and the labor sector. I was the NCP Coordinator, thus, all formal communications about concerns or routine updates were channeled through my office.

The Broken NCP Social Contract

This article notes that the NCP was an opportunity for non-state actors to collectively mobilize the nation for national dialogue. Nonetheless, the NCP’s major limitation was its failure to generate a framework of engagement of the government to operationalize its aspirations on national dialogue and guarantee its success, noted one key informant (Interview, May 6, 2025). Yet, the NCP also manifested limitations from the time it was launched. During an interview, an activist who led one of the technical committees argued that the NCP was prematurely launched (Interview, April 29, 2025). He held that the buy-in from the broader constituencies of the ZHOCD and civil society groups was not sought before the launch. The activist suggested that instead of launching the NCP through a mobilization conference, a consolidation event should have been considered to cement the relationships among the members. In support of the activist, one can argue that there was not enough time for the church and civil society to bond and strengthen their social contract; hence, it was broken along the way.

Yohannes and Dessu (2020) hold that inclusivity is one of the most critical defining factors of national dialogues; thus, there is a need to genuinely include different sections of society. Civil society, women, youths, faith actors, businesses, and traditional leaders are often cited as key players that need to join the state and political actors in dialogue. Stigant and Murray (2015) add that in order to maximize a dialogue’s potential to address the real drivers of a conflict, all of the key interest groups should participate in the process. The Yemen 2013-2014 National Dialogue Conference (NDC) is noteworthy for its inclusion of a broad set of stakeholder groups (Stigant and Murray, 2015). The NCP lacked an inclusivity approach, and that contributed to its collapse.

The NCP through Rousseau’s Lens

Metaphorically, this article regards the NCP as a ‘sovereign’ or society established by members to work toward a common good: i.e. the general will. The NCP members were naturally free to join the society for mutual benefit and that of their constituencies they represented. Thus, the members transformed their programming freedom into moral freedom, whereby individuals act according to the shared NCP values and principles. The commitment made by the NCP members showed a social contract that values mutual respect, equality, and

shared responsibilities (Philosophies of Life, 2025).

In line with Rousseau's argument, the church and civil society came together to form a "society," i.e. the NCP which was formalized through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on December 13, 2019 (NCP, 2019). In January of 2020, the operationalization of the NCP was done through drafting a constitution and the establishment of structures (secretariat and technical committees) (NCP Constitution, 2020). This highlighted the social contract as envisaged by Rousseau. Individual wills were submitted to the collective will of the NCP. The commitments made on the launch day symbolized renunciation of the individual church and civil society's rights, freedoms and perceptions toward the national question. Reciprocation of duties was also expected to be evident through the technical committees formed. Rousseau cautioned against individual members of a society (the sovereign) from freely making individual decisions to pursue individual interests at the expense of collective benefits. The social contract signed by members was to guarantee the pursuit of collective interests. In Rousseau's conceptualization of social contract and its supposed effects, democracy is central in guiding the interaction of members. There is a need for a collective decision made through periodic meetings. The NCP constitution, although still a draft then, was supposed to guide the democratic procedures within the set structures. The following section critically analyzes the collapse of the NCP.

Structured but Uncoordinated Approaches

A national dialogue should have a clear structure to facilitate conversations at different levels. The structure should carry a certain mandate with appropriately set rules and procedures for the participants (Stigant and Murray, 2015). The current article generally notes that the NCP lacked clarification of rules of engagement despite the establishment of the General Council, secretariat, and technical committees through a draft constitution. There were no predictable mechanisms to monitor each structure's performance. This cultivated the ground for mistrust that eventually manifested between the church and the civil society groups (at least some of them).

The NCP International Relations Committee, in particular, accused the ZHOCD of running a parallel engagement with the government, following the issuance of the Consensus Call in February of 2021 by the church. Similar accusations were levelled against the ZHOCD when it attempted to engage the SADC without sharing the key documents with the NCP first. The ZHOCD maintained that it retained its autonomy (individual rights) even though it was part of the NCP (the sovereign or society). A red flag was also raised by members, arguing that the relevant committee had the sole responsibility to engage foreign actors concerning Zimbabwe's national dialogue issues. This matter exposed the limitations of the Social Contract Theory as a tool to explain the relationships of members in a society. Rousseau only suggested that members are not supposed to freely decide on their interests without offering a remedy to the possibility of such development happening in the real world. One could therefore ask the following question: If the NCP failed to coordinate itself, how would it engage a key actor such as the government?

Personality Dynamics in a "Sovereign"

Rousseau did not take the time to comprehensively address the issue of personalities in a society. As noted by the Philosophies of Life (2025), Social Contract Theory undermines individualism in favor of collectivism, which further relegates individual ideas to the periphery, albeit they may be useful in a group. Philosophers such as Jon Locke emphasized natural rights, namely life, property, and liberty, which raise the autonomy of individuals.

The Philosophies of Life recommends the need for balancing individual and collective rights in society.

Personality dynamics affected the NCP's progress. The NCP was made up of personalities from the church and civil society with different educational and professional backgrounds. For instance, some leaders of civil society organizations had been enjoying unchallenged intellectual prowess. The case of the leaders of the PCC is a good example. In several initiatives that have been started, including the NTA, they have been showing their personalized abilities. But, individual leaders in the ZHOCD were independent thinkers who offered intellectual ideas toward the resolution of the country's problems. In the end, the ZHOCD leaders were seen as obstacles to the NTA or other proposals by the civil society. Thus, when the NCP Secretariat was set up with the ZCC leadership, some members challenged that arrangement, advocating that the NCP General Secretary was supposed to be independent of the participating organizations. The Social Contract Theory did not foresee the issue of personality dynamics.

Assumed Cooperation in the NCP

The Philosophies of Life (2025) notes another limitation of the Social Contract Theory: i.e. its assumption about human equality and cooperation in a given society also weakened its utility. In reality, a society is characterized by conflicting desires, greed, and power struggles among members. These factors normally shape society. A leader of one of the organizations that led one of the NCP technical committees argued that the leadership of the church, as the secretariat, was a major factor in the collapse of the platform. For him, it was going to be difficult for the churches to lead a national institution like the NCP since the church is not homogeneous. Thus, "the government was going to compromise and divide the church at some point" (Interview, April 28, 2025). This view dismantles the assumption of the Social Contract Theory about the cooperation of members in a society. While the church viewed itself as the natural convener of national dialogues through the NCP, there were elements in the civil society that disapproved of it, although they did it from the underground. One can argue that it could have been better if the launch of the NCP had been delayed to allow the gradual evolution of relationships among potential members. The launch was hinged on the supposed social contract; yet, at times, the concept of contract remains unrealistic and idealistic, which manifested within the NCP later.

Nonetheless, according to Sparknotes (2025), Rousseau acknowledged the reality of frictional relationships when, at times, one partner goes against the general will of the others. This explains why he suggested convening regular and periodic assemblies to maintain awareness of the general will. The NCP technical committees convened regular virtual sessions (since it was during the COVID-2019 era) to facilitate conversations on particular themes of the NCP. The General Council also met to establish a platform for continued reflection on the national issues. Nevertheless, the meetings were subsequently affected by the frictional relationships noted earlier. Unlike Rousseau, who suggested a tribunal or court to mediate in cases of disputes, the NCP lacked that mechanism—hence, its collapse.

The Social Contract Does Not Stop Competing Interests

While Social Contract Theory emphasizes general will as a guiding principle of society, one can note its failure to stop competing interests, which have the potential to destroy the sovereign. The social contract promotes collective decision-making and interests at the expense of individual interests. Thus, smaller and dissenting voices, even when right, can see their ideas suppressed. The ZHOCD was elected the chair and secretariat of the NCP, while

other members occupied spaces in the technical committees. When the civil society raised concerns about the position of the General Secretary being occupied by a participating member (ZCC), the ZCBC (chair) threatened to withdraw from the NCP if the secretariat was moved from the church.

One can therefore note that the civil society could not win since the ZHOCD aimed to protect its interests; thus, the former's voice was suppressed. Accordingly, the NCP managed to bring together key players that had the potential to influence national dialogue outcomes that are comprehensive and inclusive, but the platform failed to do so because of competition among members (Gumbo and Shava, 2021). The multi-sectoral nature of the NCP was thus a missed opportunity to mobilize the country for a national dialogue.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

The article gave a historical account of the church and civil society in Zimbabwe's efforts to influence national dialogue through the NCP. It was noted that the working relationship between the church and civil society was marred by mistrust and competition for leadership of national dialogue processes. While an application of Rousseau's version of Social Contract Theory helped in the presentation of the NCP as a society, the theory failed to explain the relational dynamics that manifested among personalities leading the institution. It also assumed that there would always be cooperation in a society, which was proved wrong by the NCP case. The NCP, although an opportunity to mobilize the nation toward national dialogue, did not establish an engagement framework with the government.

Based on the findings of this article, it is recommended that there is a need for church and civil society initiatives to be allowed to mature before concrete structures are established. Learning from the KNDR (Kenya), national dialogue should start as a crisis management approach as it attracts other actors for a more broad-based platform. Trust and confidence-building should be infused as the initial practical components of church-civil society initiatives. Furthermore, it is important to agree on clear roles and coordination frameworks to avoid mistrust and encroachment into each other's spaces.

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