DEVOLUTION AND THE QUEST FOR PEACE AND NATIONAL COHESION IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract: This article investigates whether devolution, as currently implemented in Zimbabwe by the Mnangagwa administration, will project the nation towards peace and national cohesion. Such an interrogation is motivated by Zimbabwe's historical trajectory that is underpinned by deep-seated political, ethnic, racial, and regional cleavages that predate the colonial epoch. Accordingly, this article, based on interviews and the study of reports and literature, posits that the current devolution process in Zimbabwe is part of the Mnangagwa administration's package of cosmetic reforms designed to mislead Africa and the West. Congruently, lukewarm and cosmetic devolution dictated by a kleptocratic, financially constrained, and authoritarian centre (central government) is likely to frustrate the periphery (grassroots), accentuate existing social schisms, and further inflame secessionist sentiments in some provinces of Zimbabwe.

Keywords: *decentralisation, devolution, peace, national cohesion, Zimbabwe*

Introduction and Context

Paradoxically, decentralisation in Zimbabwe traces its roots to Robert Mugabe (1924-2019), the country's first and longest serving post-colonial leader who ruled the country with an iron fist from 1980 to 2017.[1] Mugabe was toppled by his military generals via a "soft coup" in November 2017.[2] Moyo and Mandikwaza (2022: 6) attribute Zimbabwe's political and

1 Zimbabwe is a Southern African nation divided into 10 provinces, 59 districts, and 1, 200 wards. The country covers an area of 390,745 km² and had a population of 16,320,537 as of 2022 (Zim Rights 2020: 13). Zimbabwe gained its independence from Britain in April 1980 through a blend of armed struggle and negotiation process.

2 It is often referred to as a "soft coup" because no naked force was used on then President, Robert Mugabe. Rather, he resigned under duress.

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economic decadence to Mugabe's scorched-earth policies. Also, he was a controversial leader who was loved and hated in equal measure; hence, the lexicons "Mugabephobia" (hatred for Mugabe) and "Mugabephilia" (love for Mugabe) (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ngqulunga 2022: 6). The coup that dislodged Mugabe in 2017 ushered in Emmerson Mnangagwa (Mugabe's former deputy) as the new president of Zimbabwe. When Mnangagwa assumed power in 2017, he promised to implement an ambitious programme of economic and political reforms in Zimbabwe (Moyo and Mandikwaza 2022: 8), including the implementation of devolution. The devolution process and its trajectory in Zimbabwe cannot be divorced from the country's colonial history and subsequent decentralisation efforts in the post-colonial era.

The need for decentralisation in general, and devolution in particular in Zimbabwe, sprang from the country's style of administration during the colonial epoch. The colonial administration in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) was highly centralised and curtailed grassroot participation (Kurebwa 2012). In the same vein, Mapuva and Mapuva (2014) note that: "The centralised local government system imposed substandard and centrally defined programmes on African and Native Councils..." After independence, there was therefore the need for a radical policy shift to accommodate the grassroots in the policymaking and implementation processes through decentralisation.

In the early stages of the Zimbabwe's independence, the government embarked on the policy of decentralisation of power and authority to local authorities. In that regard, the Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985) was meant to create local government structures to promote participatory development and good governance through the process of decentralisation. Equally important were the Thirteen Principles to Guide the Decentralisation Process (1996), which "covered a variety of areas including decentralisation of responsibilities and fiscal powers, capacity building and coordination of government activities" (Zinyama and Chimanikire 2019: 153). Other relevant measures included the Growth with Equity and ZIMPREST policies, and the local government Acts. However, due to excessive central government interference in local governance structures and what Brand (1991) terms, "centrally created decentralisation," decentralisation in Zimbabwe failed to pay dividends, leading to calls for a more "radical" form of decentralisation called devolution. Devolution is provided in section 264 of Zimbabwe's 2013 constitution.

Though it seems to support devolution at face value, the Mnangagwa administration has displayed hesitancy in fully implementing devolution in Zimbabwe. Correspondingly, Mbuso and Motsi (2023) observe that:

"Mnangagwa has not only continued the actions that are ultra vires Zimbabwe's new Constitution but has exhibited reticence to supporting meaningful actions that give effect to a devolved political system in Zimbabwe." Such hesitancy by the Mnangagwa administration to fully implement devolution runs contrary to development literature, which often touts devolution as a locomotive for good governance and development. Notably, devolution is often linked to essential ingredients of the development process such as peace and national cohesion (OECD 2019). This article therefore seeks to interrogate whether devolution as currently implemented by the Mnangagwa administration, will lead to peace and national cohesion in Zimbabwe. There is a glaring scholarship lacuna in the context of devolution vis-à-vis peace and national cohesion in Zimbabwe, hence the relevance of this article. This article utilises data gleaned from conversations with leaders of civil society organisations, resident associations, governance experts, academics and community members in Zimbabwe. In addition, this article also utilised observation and desktop research.

Decentralisation: A Conceptual Overview

Decentralisation, which is sometimes characterised as a "silent" or "quiet" revolution, is among the most important reforms of the past 50 years (OECD 2019). Decentralisation is a complex multifaceted concept (World Bank 2020). Hence, Olowu (2001: 2) describes decentralisation as "a relative, complex and multidimensional process." But what exactly is decentralisation? This section provides a conceptual overview and highlights the dividends and drawbacks of decentralisation. The "three waves of decentralisation" are also highlighted.

Definitions of decentralisation vary but are interconnected. Decentralisation is "the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent government organisations and/or the private sector" (World Bank 2020). Correspondingly, "Decentralisation is usually referred to as the transfer of powers from central government to lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Crook and Manor 1998; Agrawal and Ribot 1999). Sayer et al. (2004: 5) note that: "The term decentralisation is used to cover a broad range of transfers of the 'locus of decision making' from central governments to regional, municipal or local governments." The common denominator among the above definitions of decentralisation is that it entails dispersing political and economic power and authority from the centre (central government) to the periphery (grassroots).

Decentralisation mainly falls into four categories: political, administrative, fiscal, and economic/market-decentralisation. Some of these four types have their sub-types. Political decentralisation aims to give citizens or their elected representatives more power in public decision-making. It is often associated with pluralistic politics and representative government, but can also support democratisation by giving citizens, or their representatives, more influence in the formulation and implementation of policies (World Bank 2020). On the other hand, administrative decentralisation seeks to redistribute authority, responsibility, and financial resources for providing public services among different levels of government (ibid). It is divided into de-concentration, delegation, and devolution.

De-concentration as described by Muchabaiwa and Chiminya (2010: 26) in the following way: "Occurs when central government disperses its officials to sub-national levels to carry out regular functions under the authority of the central government. There is no transfer of power to sub national levels of government." Therefore, de-concentration does not entail the transfer of power and authority to local levels of government. Delegation on the other hand is the transfer of certain functions to sub-national levels to be performed on an agency basis. However, central government still retains public accountability and responsibility to provide funds, material resources, and personnel for the delegated functions (Muchabaiwa and Chiminya 2010: 26). Like de-concentration, delegation is not free from the vice of central government control.

Furthermore, devolution involves "the transfer from centre to locality decision making powers and associated resources... An important element of devolution is discretionary authority which limits central government supervisory role so as to ensure that local government is operating within national policies" (Elcock and Minogue 2001: 101). The most striking feature about this definition is the powers that are granted to local authorities in terms of dealing with local resources. Devolution can therefore entail fund raising, budgeting, and financial use of local resources by local authorities. It is a more "independent" form of decentralisation.

Fiscal decentralisation and economic decentralisation (sometimes known as market decentralisation) are also common types of decentralisations. Fiscal decentralisation can be described in the following terms:

> Fiscal decentralisation can take many forms, including a) self-financing or cost recovery through user charges, b) co-financing or co-production arrangements through which

> the users participate in providing services and infrastructure through monetary or labour contributions; c) expansion of local revenues through property or sales taxes, or indirect charges; d) intergovernmental transfers that shift general revenues from taxes collected by the central government to local governments for general or specific uses; and e) authorisation of municipal borrowing and the mobilisation of either national or local government resources through loan guarantees (World Bank 2020).

The most complete forms of decentralisation from a government's perspective are privatisation and deregulation because they shift responsibility for functions from the public to the private sector (World Bank 2020).

Economic decentralisation is divided into privatisation and deregulation. Muchabaiwa and Chiminya (2010: 26) note that deregulation, "Consists of transferring service provision or production activities previously owned and regulated by the public sector to competing private organisations. The best example of deregulation is where government hires a private company to provide certain services to government." De-regulation is mainly the contracting of private entities by government in order to execute certain duties for or on behalf of the government. Privatisation on the other hand "Is the transfer of service provision through the di-vestment of state-owned enterprises and private-public ventures. In this case the government creates parastatals which will provide services on a business principle of gaining profit" (Muchabaiwa and Chiminya 2010: 26). Therefore, privatisation is meant to boost government revenue and is opposed to free service delivery that is advocated by socialists.

Importantly, decentralisation in Africa unfolded in three notable periods or "waves." The first decentralisation period (or "wave") consolidated itself just before and at the point of independence (from the late 1940s through the early 1960s), when local (and state) authorities were being established by mutual agreement between the nationalists and the departing colonial authorities (Stren and Eyo 2007: 3). The next phase occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s. "when in a response to overcentralisation and problems with local project implementation, central governments throughout the developing world looked for administrative means of relocating development committees, technical ministries, and even large projects at the district level 'closer to the people'" (Stren and Eyo 2007: 5). The third phase started in the late 1980s up to the present moment and involved a great number of states—both large and medium-sized—opting to undertake measures of

decentralisation from the centre to local governments with support from the civil society (Stren and Eyo 2007: 5). Zimbabwe's decentralisation agenda can be linked to the early and late 1980s.

Decentralisation has proponents and critics. Proponents of decentralisation often credit it as an engine for good governance and development. OECD (2019: 128) lists some of the benefits of decentralisation as follows: allocative efficiency, efficient public service provision, innovation, fiscal responsibility, accountability, economic growth, regional convergence, participation, increased revenue collection, reduced corruption, and political stability. Scholars and authorities whose viewpoint dovetail with the above viewpoint on decentralisation are many and include: Stren and Eyoh 2007; Olowu 2001; World Bank 2020; Zinyama and Chimanikire 2019; Crook and Manor 1998; Agrawal and Ribot 1999, among a host of others. On the other hand, OECD (2019: 128) also highlights the pitfalls of decentralisation as the following: diseconomies of scale, overlapping responsibilities, lack of capacities, destructive competition, disparities, local and national elite takeover, low participation, and risks of slow development and stagnation. Thus, decentralisation presents both opportunities and challenges. As indicated by Olowu (2001) and OECD (2019), the success of decentralisation is largely hinged on how it is implemented.

Decentralisation and the Principle of Subsidiarity

Decentralisation (including devolution) can be viewed through the lenses of the principle of subsidiarity as espoused and practiced by the European Union. The principle of subsidiarity is laid down and encapsulated in Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and Protocol (No 2) on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality (European Parliament 2024). The general aim of the principle of subsidiarity is to guarantee a degree of independence for a lower authority in relation to a higher body or for a local authority in relation to central government. It therefore involves the sharing of powers between several levels of authority, a principle that forms the institutional basis for federal states (European Parliament 2024). In other words, instead of every function to be performed at the EU headquarters in Brussels, the principle of subsidiarity decentralises certain functions and powers to member states based on competence. This a reflection of decentralisation at a macro level. The same principle is applicable in the context of decentralisation where power, authority, and certain functions are decentralised to the local or lower levels of government. This dovetails with the principle of subsidiarity.

Devolution: Salient Arguments and Counter-Arguments

Devolution is one of the most hotly debated policy issues in Africa and beyond. The devolution debate is polarising in the sense that, over time, it has led to the emergence of two antagonistic camps: its staunch and relentless supporters versus its vehement critics. Common arguments for and against devolution are presented below.

Arguments for Devolution

Proponents of devolution such as OECD (2019) argue that it promotes transparency and accountability by promoting grassroot participation. Devolution brings government officials closer to the people through local governance structures. This promotes citizen participation and transparency in policy formulation and implementation. Styler (2013) observes that although South Africa has hurdles to overcome, devolution has given a voice to the grassroots in governance issues. Devolved local structures could also be training grounds for politicians in preparation for national level politics. Also, devolved structures of governance could act as buffer zones that prevent the national political elite from abusing local resources thereby preventing corruption.

Most African states were subjected to colonial rule's divide and rule strategy which left them politically, ethnically, regionally, religiously, racially fragmented. These cleavages sometimes plunge nations into civil strife. Also, they have the potential to stoke secessionist sentiments and longing (Olowu 2001: 12), as in the case of South Sudan which separated from Sudan in 2011. However, one viewpoint is that devolution's inclusive approach could rectify regional imbalances and curtail separatist movements by making their agenda irrelevant. If devolution is properly implemented, regions would benefit from their local resources. This could curtail disgruntlement by locals as they would be benefiting from the national cake at a local level. Thus, devolution could promote harmony and cohesion by uniting different regions in their diversity. Furthermore, one of the most popular narratives about devolution is that it promotes regional equality due to its promotion of exploitation of local resources for the development of the same regions (OECD 2019: 128). A formula can be devised where regions with more resources can share with those with less to achieve regional equality. Devolution can therefore promote equitable resource distribution.

Furthermore, Olowu (2001) notes that in most cases, the postcolonial state in Africa is strong where it ought to be weak and weak where it ought to be strong. Olowu traces this problem to a centralisation of power by the central governments of both the colonial and postcolonial era. Arguably, devolution can therefore whittle the powers of central government to ameliorate the abuse of power and authority by the central government. Styler (2013) notes that South Africa's devolution of power and authority was a response to the Apartheid government's centralised power and authority. Also, devolution is believed to promote administrative efficiency by limiting bureaucratic hurdles through sharing responsibilities with local authorities (OECD 2024; Olowu 2001). In that regard, it can be argued that delays are eliminated, and efficiency and effectiveness promoted. This could also promote investment opportunities, as investors do not like red tape.

Counter-Arguments

Though often presented as an antidote to poor governance, inequality, corruption and national disunity, devolutionary decentralisation seems to have its shortcomings and sceptics. Although devolution is often said to promote transparency and accountability, evidence in some cases suggest otherwise. Lambsdorff (2013) notes that devolution, and decentralisation in general, sometimes represent "a big story that does not deliver" as they sometimes lead to the decentralisation of central government corruption and inefficiencies to local levels. Correspondingly, Chepng'etich, Waiganjo and Ismael (2020) revealed that Kenyan County "First Ladies" were getting hefty salaries and abusing public funds at the expense of local communities. Apart from Kenya other countries that practice devolution such as the Philippines, Ukraine, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, and Trinidad and Tobago have not been spared from local government corruption linked to syndicates at the national levels (ibid.). Furthermore, local structures could be "captured" by the local elite, which in turn inhibits grassroot participation (Olowu 2001; Chepng'etich, Waiganjo and Ismael 2020; OECD 2019). Grassroot participation is an essential hallmark of devolution.

Furthermore, instead of fostering national unity, devolution could lead to directly the opposite. This is in line with Olowu's (2001) argument that devolution can undermine national unity by accentuating local, ethnic, tribal, regional, and separatist tendencies and trajectories. Veritas (2010), read by *New Zimbabwe* (2013), notes that devolution "can encourage regionalism or tribalism. Advancing one's own province or even tribe may be acceptable

in a provincial politician, but it is a very serious defect at the national level." Therefore, devolution could lead to what Fanon (1963: 121) greatly feared: a scenario where "the tribe is favoured over the nation." In the Zimbabwean context, devolution could potentially provide ammunition to separatist groups in Matabeleland and Midlands. Separatism undermines national unity. Bort (2010) notes that devolution in the UK fuelled calls for Scottish independence from the UK by Scottish nationalists who viewed devolution as inadequate.

Devolution is argued to also pose the danger of exacerbating existing regional inequalities as it encourages the exploitation of local resources by respective regions (OECD 2024). This means that regions with more resources have the potential to develop at a faster rate in comparison to their counterparts. This is a recipe for regional inequality and discord. Experience in Scotland has shown that devolution can result in increased taxation by local authorities, which can create class diversities across a nation (Bort 2010). While it is true that devolution dilutes central government powers by transferring power and authority to local structures, experience in most countries has shown that the central government remains in control and can even manipulate local structures to its own advantage. Furthermore, devolution can also lead to decentralisation from central government authoritarianism to local levels especially where local leaders become stumbling blocks to citizen participation. This would be like horse-trading evil for evil.

Olowu (2001) notes that devolutionary decentralisation suffers from an administrative dilemma. Besides the danger of duplication of duties by the central and local authorities, devolution can also weaken performance by handing responsibilities to unqualified local staff which in turn could undermine administrative efficiency and effectiveness. A case in point is that of Kenyan County "First Ladies" who occupy offices with full benefits despite lack of skills by most of them (Waiganjo and Ismael 2020). Given the arguments for and against devolution, it can be deduced that the benefits of devolution outweigh its shortcomings. However, any country that implements devolution should be wary of its shortcomings.

Decentralisation in Zimbabwe: A Historical Synopsis

As indicated in the introductory section, the need for decentralisation in Zimbabwe sprang from the country's colonial history, which was characterised by a centralisation of power and authority by the minority colonial regime. Decentralisation efforts in Zimbabwe are hinged

government policy documents such as Growth with Equity, the Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985), ZIMPREST, the Thirteen Principles of Decentralisation (1996), and the local government

Acts of parliament (Zinyama and Chimanikire 2019: 153). Notably, "The Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985) outlined the new local government structures and introduced new development committees, at village, ward, district, provincial and national levels with the aim of fostering bottom-up development planning" (Muchadenyika 2013: 6). Development was supposed to be initiated from below (grassroots) in a bottom to top approach. The Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985) meant that development and policy initiation was supposed to be channelled from the ward, district, province up to the national level.

Notably, in 1988, some progress was made when a Committee of Ministers on Decentralisation was set up, as well as a Working Party of Permanent Secretaries and the Rural Development Council Coordinating Body for Provincial Business (RDCCBP) on Decentralisation and the Cabinet adopted Thirteen Principles to Guide the Decentralisation process. The 13 principles covered a variety of areas including the decentralisation of responsibilities and fiscal powers, capacity building, coordination of government activities, taxation, and transfer of power and authority to lower levers of power (Zinyama and Chimanikire 2019: 153). However, a closer look at the 13 principles would indicate that they are devoid of political will and legal force that was needed for devolution to fully roar into life.

Also, decentralisation as spelt out in the Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985) and other government policy documents did not materialise due to the government's desire to create a one-party state modelled along the lines of a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist centralised polity. Correspondingly, Onslow (2011: 2) notes that:

> In Zimbabwe and ZANU-PF's case the process of centralising power took place in stop-start phases: first, there was the period 1980-1987, leading to the 1987 Pact of Unity, after which ZAPU was absorbed within ZANUPF. The one-party phase dominated the political scene until 1999, a period ended by the emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change. In the third phase, post-2000, ZANU-PF maintained its dominance by restructuring state power, and attempting to manipulate the constitution and the electoral process, until the Global Political Agreement of September 2008.

As stated by Onslow above, the ZANU PF government has been concerned about the centralisation of political power since the 1980s up to the present moment. The quest for a one-party state and the centralisation of power left the line between the ZANU PF party and the state blurred. Hlatywayo and Mangongera (2020) characterise this phenomenon as "party-state-military conflation." This largely explains why decentralisation did not yield positive results. Muchadenyika (2013: 6) adds that, "It is evident that the government was not committed to the letter and spirit of making local government a distinct sphere." There was a lack of commitment to enforce decentralisation on the part of the government. "In practice, development planning agencies suffered time and budgetary constraints, lack of skilled personnel and central government interference in local decision making" (ibid.). As a result of central government interference and control, decentralisation in Zimbabwe produced what Brand (1991) calls "centrally created decentralisation." For decentralisation to succeed, it must not be heavily controlled by the central government.

There are legal and regulatory instruments in place that makes decentralisation dependent on the central government in Zimbabwe. For instance, according to the Thirteenth Principle to guide the decentralisation process, "the Public Service Commission will manage the transfer of personnel from central government to rural district councils where this happens as part of decentralisation" (Zimbabwe Institute 2005: 5). The Zimbabwe Institute (ibid.) further notes that:

> The Ministry of Local Government administers all the Acts and Statutory Instruments promulgated in the local government area. The Minister retains a substantial supervisory role over all local government units (LGUs) and enjoys the ultimate power of intervention and suspension of any local council. In some sense, the LGUs in Zimbabwe operate at the behest and suffering of the Minister. In fact, the main legal instruments of local government invest the President and the Minister of Local Government with the power to suspend or act in place of a local authority and the power to nullify some decisions of local authorities. For instance, in the RDC Act alone, there are more than 250 instances where the Minister can intervene in the day to day running of Rural District Councils.

The excessive interference of the Minister of Local Government in local affairs impedes on decentralisation compromises between participatory development and good governance. As highlighted above, the minister responsible for local governance can interfere 250 times in the day-to-day running of local governance structures. Thus, the minister is given power by law to usurp the powers of local governance structures. This renders them ineffective and irrelevant. The president can also directly interfere in local governance structures. "Under the RDC Act, for instance, the President is empowered to declare, name, alter or abolish a district" (Zimbabwe Institute 2005: 5).

In addition, the government created the District Development Fund (DDF) in order to provide resources to local communities, especially communal areas. However, DDF has been rocked by corruption and mismanagement. "It has since suffered from goal displacement and has become a vehicle for massive mismanagement of resources and corruption by both the local and national political elite" (Zimbabwe Institute 2005). Where there is too much interference by the central authorities in local government issues, transparency and accountability are difficult to attain. As a result, corruption and poor service delivery prevail.

Central government interference on local structures compromises development and good governance. "The implication is that there is very little participation in the development of policies" (Sachikonye 2007: 54). After the failure of decentralisation and the resultant underdevelopment, regional inequality, and poor governance, there have been calls for devolution by some Zimbabweans. MDC N (2013) notes that, "Due to an absence of a devolved system of government, excessive centralisation of power, high levels of corruption, politicisation of public institutions, awkward institutionalised policy and widespread bad governance – the past three decades have triggered the virtual collapse of our public service delivery." This is the reason why most Zimbabweans are calling for a more independent form of decentralisation called devolution.

Zimbabwe's Troubled History: Political and Social Schisms

This section reflects on Zimbabwe's tumultuous history. Such a reflection is crucial in terms of understanding why most Zimbabweans are yearning for devolution in the country. One of the biggest stains in the history of Zimbabwe is political violence articulated by Moyo (2020: 65) as the "specter

of violence" in Zimbabwe. The country's culture of political violence can be conceptualised and contextualised through the lenses of the country's political culture and socialisation in the context of the country's pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial historical trajectories (ibid). During the pre-colonial period, around 1873, the Shona communities were subjected to political violence by their Ndebele counterparts. Such violence, which is succinctly chronicled by Beach (1974) and also echoed by Malunga (2018), took the form of raids, displacements and killings.

Zimbabwe was subjected to brutal British colonial rule from 1897 up to the country's independence in 1980. "Through colonialism, settlers became local in Africa and Africans became aliens in their own native territories. Colonialism, especially in its apartheid expression… questioned the humanity of Black Africans, displaced them, and dispossessed them of their land" (Mpofu 2022: 36). Thus, colonialism even in Zimbabwe was characterised by violence dispossession and displacement. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009: 1144) rightly observes: "Colonialism was never a terrain of democracy, human rights and freedom; rather it was a terrain of conquest, violence, police rule, militarism and authoritarianism." Banana (1989) sheds light on how brutal the British colonial system was in Zimbabwe. Consequently, colonialism in Zimbabwe deeply divided the people according to racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and class persuasions.

Political violence continued unabated in the post-colonial era in Zimbabwe. The "Entumbane" clashes between ZANLA and ZIPRA liberation forces in 1981 laid the seeds of disunity in newly independent Zimbabwe. However, in independent Zimbabwe, the darkest era in terms of political violence falls between 1982 and 1987 (Moyo 2020: 70). During this period, the Mugabe regime implemented the "Gukurahundi" policy, which was meant to stamp out "dissidents" in the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces of Zimbabwe. The Gukurahundi massacres left 20,000 civilians dead according to a report by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (1997). Just like the Entumbane clashes, the Gukurahundi massacres fuelled ethnic antagonism in Zimbabwe.

Political violence in Zimbabwe was also notable in the early 1990s. Moyo (1992) analyses electoral violence, which witnessed the shooting of the opposition Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) candidate, Patrick Kombayi by known state security agents in 1990. In the year 1999, a new opposition political party was formed in Zimbabwe in the mould of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The MDC was formed to provide a democratic

alternative to the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)'s violent and kleptocratic rule (Moyo 2020: 66). Since the time of the formation of the MDC in 1999 to date, political violence has become a permanent feature of Zimbabwe's political landscape. The violence of the 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2008 elections is sufficiently chronicled by scholars such as Makumbe (2002; 2006; 2009a; 2009b), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2004) and Masunungure (2009), among a host of others.

It should be noted that the centralisation of political power largely created the Zimbabwe Crisis. In 1987, Robert Mugabe abolished the position of Prime Minister and replaced it with the powerful and authoritative position of Executive President. In the early 2000s, Mugabe militarised the state. Masunungure (2009) notes that the militarisation of the state under Mugabe occurred in two phases. The first stage took the form of a growing number of senior military officers being appointed to lead strategic state institutions. The second stage took the form of the creation of the "Joint Operations Command (JOC)" – an institution that comprised of heads of the military, police, air force, prison service, and intelligence. The JOC was involved in the bloody 2008 elections, which, according to Masunungure (2009), were a "militarized election." Congruently, Mandaza (2014) characterises Zimbabwe as a "securocratic state."[3] Also, Zimbabwe can be described as a quasi-military dictatorship and a de facto one-party state due to the dominance of what Hlatywayo and Mangongera (2020) call the party-state-military conflation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya (2020) characterise the current crop of ZANU PF nationalist leadership as the "Chimurenga aristocracy" considering their entitlement mentality. Considering their low levels of craft competence in public affairs, the current ZANU PF leadership arguably fit into the kakistocracy label.[4]

Moreover, the post-Mugabe era has also been characterised by political violence. On 1 August 2018, soldiers gunned down six civilians and seriously injured 35 others on the streets of Harare during election related protests (Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the 2018 Post-Election Violence 2018: vi). Also, the killing of at least 17 people during the protests of January 2019, and the subsequent abductions of pro-democracy activists and opposition politicians by state security agents (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum 2019), is a grim illustration of the dominance of political violence in Zimbabwe. Since Mnangagwa seized power via a military coup

3 Securocrats are powerful military personnel. Therefore, a securocratic state is a state dominated and dictated by securocrats.

4 Kakistocracy is rule by the least qualified individuals in a country.

in 2017, attempts have been made through state institutions to decimate opposition and dissenting voices in Zimbabwe. This has further accentuated political polarisation in Zimbabwe. It is also worth mentioning that the coup that dislodged Mugabe drove away his ministers to exile and angered his loyalists at home.

Notably, Zimbabwe's post-independence history is also characterised by massive corruption scandals which have caused the country's economy not only to plummet but also aggrieved the masses. Zimbabwe's main corruption scandals since the country's independence and the most famous ones include the 1988 Willowgate Scandal, the 1994 War Victims Compensation Scandal, and the 2020 COVID-19 scandal involving Drax International LLC (Pindula News 2022). Considering the list of above cited corruption scandals during the Mugabe and Mnangagwa eras, it is fair to characterise Zimbabwe as a kleptocracy.5 Other triggers of economic collapse in Zimbabwe are the IMF-supported economic structural adjustment programme (ESAP) of the early 1990s, the war veterans' pay-outs in 1997, and the participation in and funding of Zimbabwe's intervention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's civil war in 1998-99. These events greatly strained Zimbabwe's economy (Moyo 2020: 74-75).

Furthermore, in the last two decades, secessionist movements and parties have emerged in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe. Mthwakazi Liberation Front (MLF) and Mthwakazi Republic Party (MRP) are the most notable. The motivations behind these secessionist parties include the unresolved Gukurahundi massacres, "phony" decentralisation, perceived ethnic discrimination, political persecution, and economic marginalisation (Moyo 2021; Moyo 2022: Fornies 2022; Hadebe 2020). However, in 2022, Zimbabwe's president, Emmerson Mnangagwa issued a chilling warning to secessionist movements in Zimbabwe. He promised to "shorten their lives" and urged them to "walk a path that prolongs your life" (Pindula 2022). This shows that, if not handled well, the issue of secession can plunge Zimbabwe into civil strife and chaos. Accordingly, the burning questions are: can devolution as currently implemented by the Mnangagwa administration quench the desire for secession and the potential instability associated with it in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe? Can devolution promote national peace and cohesion in Zimbabwe? The next sections tackle these questions.

5 Kleptocracy means rule by the very corrupt.

Devolution in Zimbabwe

This section seeks to highlight the policy, institutional, and legal effort that has been made vis-à-vis the implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe. Before delving deep into the discussion, it is important to mention that due to Zimbabwe's democracy and good governance deficit, also known as the "Zimbabwe Crisis," civil society organisations, resident associations, communities, and opposition parties are clamouring for devolution as a redemptive policy path. Proponents of devolution in Zimbabwe believe that decentralisation, as espoused in the Prime Minister's Directive (1984 and 1985) and other policy blueprints, failed to pay dividends and, therefore, ought to be replaced with devolution. Moreover, the majority of Zimbabweans favour devolution. An Afro-barometer survey of 2012 revealed that 7 out of 10 provinces of Zimbabwe and 61% of the population favour devolution (Afro-barometer 2012). Unlike the Mugabe administration, which was opposed to devolution, the Mnangagwa administration has made some effort, albeit cautiously, in terms of devolutionary decentralisation. ZEPARU (2019: VII) observes that: "The government has adopted a gradualist approach to the implementation of devolution and not a big bang approach as has happened in other jurisdictions in order to learn and pick lessons as the process is being rolled out." However, this hesitancy and slow pace in implementing devolution has raised criticism from different quarters.

Devolution is enshrined in Section 264 (1) of the new constitution of Zimbabwe: "Whenever appropriate, governmental powers and responsibilities must be devolved to provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities who are competent to carry out those responsibilities efficiently and effectively." In the same vein, the constitution provides that the three tiers of government in Zimbabwe are: the national government; provincial and metropolitan councils; and local authorities, which are urban and rural councils (Zim Rights 2020: 12). Furthermore, the government amended the constitution and repealed sections 268 and 269 of the constitution to set out separate frameworks for provincial and metropolitan councils. Section 301(3) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe also states that no less than 5% of the national revenues raised in any financial year must be allocated to the provinces and local authorities as their share in that year. The 2019 National Budget Statement provided US$ 310 million in the budget to execute devolution, which was to be shared among 92 local authorities and 10 provincial councils. The total budget was initially projected to increase by 12% and 15.2% to US$ 347.2 million and US$ 400 million in 2020 and

2021 respectively (ZEPARU 2019: 3). Existing legislation such as the Urban Councils Act and the Rural Districts Councils Act is also meant to anchor the devolution process in Zimbabwe.

The government blueprint, Transitional Stabilisation Programme and Reforms Agenda (TSPR), adopted in 2018, directly addresses the issue of devolution of governmental powers, responsibilities, and resources with a key focus on provinces championing economic development. This resulted in a budget allocation of US$ 310 million to provincial councils in the 2019 financial year as part of the five per cent subnational and local governments are entitled to in each financial year, and this was carried over to the 2020 budget (Zimbabwe Human Rights Association 2020).

There are also institutional measures that have been put into place for the successful implementation of devolution. For instance, the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) is involved in building capacity of the devolved areas in packaging their resources for investment attraction and the President of Zimbabwe chairs of the Cabinet Committee on Devolution (ZEPARU 2019: vi). In addition, President Mnangagwa created the portfolio of Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution. Also, with support from government, the Midlands State University established the Centre for Public Policy and Devolution in 2020. The purpose of this centre is:

> To help with the designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating of devolved and participatory governance; To assist the Government of Zimbabwe frame devolution implementation, build the necessary consensus, draw lessons and creatively devise necessary institutional reforms; To provide appropriate technical and policy skills necessary for practical implementation and evaluation of devolution; and, To provide capacity development to individuals and groups from the three tiers of government, community, civil society and private sector institutions (Centre for Public Policy and Devolution 2024).

No.	**Step**	**Nature of Step**	**Year**	**Function**
1	Constitution of Zimbabwe	Legal	2013	The constitution provides for devolution and the need to allocate resources towards its implementation.
2	Rural and Urban Councils Act (Amendment)	Legal	2017	Establishes structures critical for the implementation of decentralisation including devolution.
3	Minister for Provincial and Devolution Affairs	Institutional	2018	Oversees the implementation of devolution.
4	Transitional Stabilisation Programme Reform Agenda (TSPR)	Policy	2018	Outlines policies, strategies and projects that guide *Zimbabwe's* social and economic development including devolution.
5	2019 National Budget Statement	Policy	2019	Indicates the amount of resources to be allocated for devolution purposes.
6	Cabinet Committee on Devolution	Institutional	2020	Responsible for planning and overseeing the implementation of devolution.
7	Devolution and Decentralisation Policy	Policy	2020	Promotion of inclusive growth and development through devolution.
8	Midlands State University Centre for Public Policy and Devolution	Institutional	2020	Provides capacity building in public policy and devolution.
9	Inter-Governmental Fiscal Transfers System Administrative Manual	Policy	2024	Guides local authorities on how to manage devolution funds in a transparent and accountable manner.

Table 1. Summary of Legal, Institutional, and Policy Steps Towards Devolution by the Government of Zimbabwe

Thus, it can be seen from the above discussion in this section that unlike the Mugabe administration which had a "phobia" for devolution, the Mnangagwa administration has taken some steps, albeit half-heartedly, to tackle the devolution question. However, the question is whether such steps or efforts are adequate, genuine, and whether they will lead to economic development and ultimately peace and national cohesion. The following section addresses these particular questions.

Will Devolution Foster National Peace and Cohesion in Zimbabwe?

This final section tackles the question whether devolution will translate to national peace and cohesion in Zimbabwe. The section relies on conversations with community members, traditional leaders, governance experts, civil society leaders, and existing literature on the subject. The target population for the interviews was chosen from all 10 provinces of Zimbabwe through purposive sampling and the collected data was analysed through thematic analysis. In terms of gaps vis-à-vis the collected data: the collected data was qualitative in nature and was collected through interviews and desktop research. A mixed method research (qualitative and quantitative) approach would have probably strengthened the validity and reliability of the collected data.

Findings from the discussion revealed that if past conflicts, especially the Gukurahundi massacres, are not resolved, even devolution will not foster national peace and unity in Zimbabwe. For instance, a headman in Silobela remarked: "Devolution cannot work at the present moment especially here in Midlands where people were killed during the Gukurahundi period and there has not been any meaningful effort to resolve the issue." He added that: "While other provinces were developing and enjoying peace, the people of Matabeleland and Midlands were subjected to unspeakable state sponsored violence for five years. This led to the underdevelopment of our regions." Regional inequality is detrimental to national cohesion. This rhymes with what a visibly angry man from Bulawayo said: "The ZANU PF government was busy siphoning our resources during the Gukurahundi period. They are still doing it today and it will lead to regional inequality and consequently ethnic and national disharmony. The current devolution framework does not consider that dark past. What we want is genuine devolution." Relatedly, one community member remarked: "We have many gold mines in the province but we do not see the benefit of having all those rich gold mines, we have every right to believe that our gold is being used to develop other areas and this must

be corrected" (Zimbabwe Human Rights Association 2020: 6). In other words, the devolution exercise is like scratching on the surface and ignoring deep-seated past atrocities that were committed by the state. Therefore, there is a need to address the issue of the Gukurahundi genocide through a grassroots-oriented process that will lead to national peace, cohesion, and reconciliation.

A think tank leader from Bulawayo, who described the current devolution efforts as "tokenism," was also of the view that the current devolution efforts are unlikely to succeed due to the political marginalisation of the people from Matabeleland and some parts of Midlands provinces. She went further to state that political marginalisation at a national level will impact the devolution process at a local level since the current devolution process is controlled by the ruling elite in the capital Harare. The issue of political marginalisation of leaders from Matabeleland started during the early years of Zimbabwe's independence. For instance, Tendi (2016: 7-8) notes that former ZIPRA intelligence officers were systematically weeded out of Zimbabwe's intelligence service, the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO). Political marginalisation, whether perceived or real, of the leaders of Matabeleland is detrimental to national cohesion in general and inimical to the successful implementation of devolution in particular. Devolution seeks to achieve the opposite of exclusion and marginalisation.

Furthermore, a businessman from Manicaland province said devolution in Zimbabwe would hardly succeed in cultivating a climate of peace and national cohesion in Zimbabwe due to its disregard of local culture. He retorted: "The case of devolution is a case of contradiction. How do you bring devolution to the people of Matabeleland and at the same time undermine their ceremonial king, fire their chiefs like Ndiweni, and destroy their cultural symbols at airports?" This is related to what a student from Lupane State University said: "Devolution in its current state is detached from the people's aspirations. Devolution means that at a local level, people should come up with their own leadership in line with their community and cultural needs."

Another potential challenge that was highlighted is the potential capture of the devolution process either by national or local elites leading to community discontentment. To that end, a university lecturer based in Masvingo noted that: "Devolution is a good developmental concept. However, there is a lurking danger of the process being hijacked by local or national elites for personal aggrandisement. In Kenya, the County First Ladies captured the process and embezzled funds." This argument is buttressed by Olowu's (2001: 12) submission:

> A political dilemma is the problem of local elite capture. In many instances, it is local elites rather than the most vulnerable that capture decentralised power, which is then utilized to repress the local minorities, women and foreigners in the various communities. Many traditional rulers in different parts of Africa have used decentralized power to obstruct development by diverting decentralised resources to personal uses; such rulers may thus be opposed to basic modern education, health services, sanitation and water supplies because of their fear that these may break their hold on local power.

This argument seems to hold water considering the power wielded by traditional leaders, especially chiefs in Zimbabwe. Since the Mugabe era up to the present moment, chiefs have often been pampered with hefty benefits by the ZANU PF government. Some of these benefits include connection of their homes to the power grid, luxurious vehicles, and renovation of their homesteads. In turn, chiefs and other traditional leaders such as headmen, have been at the epicentre in terms of entrenching ZANU PF's violent rule at a local level. It is therefore likely that traditional leaders, especially chiefs, will "hijack" the devolution process for personal expediency. Alternatively, they will be manipulated into puppets and agents of the central government in order to scuttle democratic devolutionary efforts. The likely end result would be public disgruntlement and disunity.

Another notable challenge with Zimbabwe's devolution exercise is a lack of political will by the Mnangagwa administration. Moyo and Motsi (2023) contend that devolution in Zimbabwe is more of a myth than a reality especially in the context of its implementation. The Mugabe administration was openly and vehemently opposed to devolution and never made efforts to implement it despite constitutional provisions on the matter. On the other hand, the Mnangagwa administration has displayed a half-hearted approach in relation to devolution. Correspondingly, a lecturer from the University of Zimbabwe noted that, "The Mnangagwa administration does not want to lose power through devolution, hence the political grandstanding and haranguing on the matter. There is paucity of resolve and devolution is merely part of Mnangagwa's reforms propaganda meant to deceive the West and African Union. Devolution largely exists on paper rather than in reality. It is a paper tiger."

The Mnangagwa administration is a continuation of the Mugabe administration, which was vehemently opposed to devolution. Notably, Mnangagwa's strategy is a blend of autocracy and progressive reforms

propaganda. Hence, "Mnangagwa's leadership generally projects a powerful autocracy that practically maintains the status quo while instrumentally using public relations for plausible deniability and reforms propaganda" (Moyo and Mandikwaza 2022: 20). Devolution can be argued to be part of Mnangagwa's package of cosmetic reforms designed for propaganda purposes. Congruently, Mhandu (2021) characterises devolution under the Mnangagwa administration as: "phony decentralisation, an enemy of the municipal administrative system and a threat to infrastructure development." Sloganeering and politicking by the central government in relation to devolution should therefore be avoided.

Lack of political will can also be linked to the snail pace in implementing devolution, the limited desire to set up robust devolutionary structures, and meagre resource allocation towards devolution by the central government. The 5% budget allocation for subnational and provincial councils is hardly enough and displays a lack of political will on the part of the central government. Another challenge is Zimbabwe's economy, which is in the "intensive care unit" and characterised by closure of companies, high levels of unemployment, acute poverty levels, low salaries, and skyrocketing cost of living. Such economic conditions coupled with rent-seeking behaviour, makes the implementation of devolution cumbersome. A lecturer in local governance at the Midlands State University noted that Zimbabwe's economic climate is not currently in sync with the successful implementation of devolution. Furthermore, the devolution implementation approach is also questionable. In the same vein, one Nkayi resident argued that the current "one-size-fits-all approach" is problematic, as it does not consider the historical, political, and socio-economic dynamics of different provinces in Zimbabwe. She argued that such an approach would lead to regional inequality and consequently fuel regional and ethnic tensions in Zimbabwe.

Decentralisation experts and scholars cite the dilemma of implementing devolution vis-à-vis national fragmentation and secession. For instance, Olowu (2001: 12) postulates that "devolutionary decentralisation might undermine national cohesion and fan the embers of secession, which is usually a real consideration in societies in which ethnic and community loyalties are quite strong relative to national cohesion." The dilemma for the Mnangagwa administration relates to fears that devolution in Zimbabwe might deepen calls for secession especially in the south-western parts of the country. Hadebe (2020: 155-180) notes that an "upsurge of pro-Mthwakazi ethnic consciousness" has taken place in Zimbabwe's western provinces of

Matabeleland.[6] He further notes that a number of political organisations and parties have since 2000 been established, demanding Matabeleland's secession from Zimbabwe, more especially since 2017, grounding their discourse on the perceived discrimination of the Ndebele people by the Shona, who constitute the majority in the country.

In light of calls for secession from Zimbabwe by some sections of the population, especially in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe, the burning question is: will the current devolution exercise quench the thirst for devolution and ultimately lead to national cohesion? It is important to pose such a question considering President's Mnangagwa's chilling warning that he will shorten the lives of those pursuing the secession agenda in Zimbabwe (Pindula 2022). This indicates that the Mnangagwa administration is ready to unleash high intensity violence to quash secessionist efforts. One Karoi resident was sceptical about devolution and noted that: "I think we should stick to the general decentralisation process as pronounced by the late President Mugabe. Devolution will strengthen the voice of those who want to divide Zimbabwe into two countries. We should strive for peace and unity and not the opposite." This statement seems to hold water considering that one member of the Mthwakazi Republic Party (a separatist party) stated that: "I think devolution is a starting point in pursuit of secession. Devolution will give us the autonomy and leeway to advance our cause. The only problem is that it is cosmetic devolution." Thus, the potential of devolution in fuelling separatist yearning and sentiments should not be overlooked. The Scottish case is a good example. Furthermore, a youth from Kezi who subscribes to secession remarked: "They are [central government] trying to deceive us with their phony devolution hoping that we will abandon our cause of separation from Zimbabwe. They are adding fuel to the fire. We will not be bribed with crumbs."

Correspondingly, a leader of one of the resident trusts in Harare argued that if the Mnangagwa administration had implemented a genuine, democratic, and horizontal devolutionary process, chances are high that the secessionist agenda would have been contained. In the same vein, a resident from Lupane noted that: "How do you go and impose cosmetic and phony devolution to a historically and culturally sensitive region like Matabeleland. It is an insult. This government wants national disharmony. They want to divide and rule us." If well implemented, devolution can promote the participation

6 Pro-Mthwakazi consciousness and groups refers to political and social groups that advocate the secession of Matabeleland and Midlands provinces from Zimbabwe in order to form an independent nation called Mthwakazi.

of minority groups like those found in Matabeleland thereby promoting their inclusion in public policymaking. Hence, decentralisation (including devolution) "can reduce tensions arising from historical, ethnic or cultural reasons by accommodating heterogeneity in public policy. Automatic decision making can help suppress local motives for conflict with central administration" (OECD 2019: 168). Devolution can also help promote the flourishing of local culture and thereby promote peace. Hence, one community member noted that: "Devolution will help to preserve and foster peace. This would also help by hiring local police who love us for who we are, not being humiliated by police who cannot speak the local languages" (Zimbabwe Human Rights Association 2020: 6).

Also, the Mnangagwa administration seems to be focused on power retention and centralisation rather than the reverse. Hence the overemphasis of section 1 of the Zimbabwean constitution, which provides that Zimbabwe is a unitary, democratic, and sovereign republic. "They will talk and talk until they're old and dead and Zimbabwe will be here still as a unitary state," bellowed President Mnangagwa (Pindula News 2022). A leader of one of the biggest youth organisations in Zimbabwe remarked: "This is a cosmetic process (devolution) driven by the central government. The Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) controls everything and the President chairs the Cabinet Committee on Devolution. It is centrally created devolution. Where are the grassroots?" Furthermore, a political analyst based in Bulawayo argued that, "Zimbabwe, as pointed out by Dr. Ibbo Mandaza is a securocratic state. I should add that Zimbabwe is a quasi-military dictatorship and de facto one-party state. Such a state cannot share power with local structures. What we are seeing in the post-Mugabe era is not decentralisation (devolution). It is re-centralisation." This viewpoint holds water considering the stranglehold that the President, his cabinet, and Provincial and Devolution Ministers have over the devolution process in Zimbabwe.

Another stumbling block to the successful implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe is the existence of undemocratic local government-related legislation, especially the Rural Districts Act and Urban Councils Act that inhibited the dispersion of power and authority to local structures during the country's decentralisation era especially in the 1980s. This explains the excessive interference by the local government minister in local government affairs. Devolution is unlikely to succeed until such undemocratic local governance legal instruments are reformed for the better. In recent years, the firing of mayors and chiefs by the local government minister is an indication of a highly centralised governance system that is impervious to democratic devolutionary

decentralisation. Thus, given the entire discussion in this section, it is evident that devolution is unlikely to lead to national peace and cohesion in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it can be said that, just like the decentralisation agenda of the 1980s and 1990s, devolution as currently implemented by the Mnangagwa administration is unlikely to pay dividends in Zimbabwe. The Mnangagwa administration is pursuing a dual and contradictory policy of decentralisation (devolution) and re-centralisation of power and authority. Notably, the current devolution process in Zimbabwe is cosmetic, lukewarm, elitist, centrally created and dictated, and contrary to the spirit of democratic decentralisation. It is executed by an authoritarian, securocratic, kleptocratic, centralised, and de facto one-party state, at the detriment of the periphery (grassroots). The likely result could be an accentuation of regional inequality, poverty, and ethnic disharmony. This, in turn, is likely to stoke grassroot discontentment and augment separatist sentiments, especially in the Matabeleland region and in some parts of the Midlands province. Thus, the current devolution implementation matrix in Zimbabwe is likely to undercut national peace and cohesion in the country. A quasi-military dictatorship that is obsessed with power centralisation and retention like the Mnangagwa administration is unlikely to pursue a grassroots-oriented devolutionary decentralisation agenda. Therefore, there is need to democratise the centre, fully address past atrocities, cease political violence, avoid reforms propaganda, and stamp out corruption for genuine and people centred devolution to be realised. National peace and cohesion will then follow.

It should be underlined that devolution should not be misconstrued as a "magic pill" that will automatically propel Zimbabwe towards a trajectory of good governance, peace, and national cohesion. It is merely part of the solution to Zimbabwe's governance and development quagmire. Notably, this article is one of the foremost to tackle devolution vis-à-vis national peace and cohesion in Zimbabwe, hence its originality and vitality in bridging the scholarship lacuna that has existed. Therefore, insights from this paper can be useful to policymakers, students, and civil society in Zimbabwe and beyond.

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