

Zimbabwe - Ndebele

Profile

Ndebele are Zimbabwe's largest minority, with the Ndebele-speaking community making up around 17 per cent of the total population. Kindred to the Zulu, in their own lands in the south-west of the country, they are traditionally a cattle-keeping people.

Historical Context

The Ndebele's history is linked to vigorous action and organization in a region poorly endowed for farming. Part of a broad advance of Nguni peoples northwards in the nineteenth century, Ndebele invaded present-day Zimbabwe in the late 1830s, some fifty years before the main European advance. Settling in the south-western highveld around present-day Bulawayo, they established a formidable new nation with powers to extract tribute from neighbouring Shona and other peoples.

Armed settlers smashed Ndebele power and grabbed their land and cattle, but cultural humiliation did not follow. For the white settlers, the Ndebele were thought to be courageous and stubborn fighters. Mission schools and hiring patterns generated strata of white- and blue-collar workers from which nationalist leaders and cultural brokers were drawn.

Discord between the leadership of ZAPU and ZANU after 1980 deteriorated into a low-level but bitter civil war from 1983 to 1987, most of it played out in Matabeleland, with Ndebele civilians the main victims. The ZANU-controlled central government sent in army units to stamp out armed 'dissidents' linked with ZAPU. Government soldiers sometimes acted with extreme brutality. It is alleged that their slogan was, 'Mandeverere muchakaura' ('Ndebeles, you will suffer'). Several thousand people are thought to have been killed or to have disappeared during this ZANU offensive, called 'Gukurahundi', which in Shona means 'the first rains of the season which wash away all the chaff'. The ZANU-ZAPU merger ended the war and brought a number of ex-ZAPU Ndebele leaders into positions of power and political patronage. But empowerment of some Ndebele political figures did not mean improved living standards for ordinary citizens. The crux of discontent was not about denial of rights to enjoy their culture, to receive instruction in the mother tongue or to form associations – all of which are afforded – but rather about denial of equal access to social and economic benefits.

Placement of new health centres in the period 1980–85 seems to have favoured Matabeleland, bringing it up to par with the rest of Zimbabwe. However, through the 1980s and 1990s, persistent allegations were made that the central government favoured Matabeleland less than other regions, including the

deliberate blocking of investment in water supply and the development of the regional capital Bulawayo.

Throughout the implosion of Zimbabwe's economy, which accelerated in 2000, the Ndebele people, prominent among the opposition MDC and distrusted by the government of President Robert Mugabe, continued to feel the brunt of his regime. Prior to elections in 2002, human rights organizations reported that the ZANU-PF allegedly threatened the Ndebele with starvation, and a document surfaced which allegedly contained a plan to exterminate the Ndebele.

In 2005 a split within the MDC further emphasized the opposition's ethnic dimensions, with the Ndebele, led by Secretary-General Welshman Ncube, generally siding with the faction headed by the breakaway leader Arthur Mutambara. The leadership of the MDC has since been Shona, in the shape of veteran leader, Morgan Tsvangirai and thereafter Mutambara. But there has always been a strong contingent of Ndebele in the senior ranks of the MDC.

Current Issues

In recent years Mugabe has continued to discriminate against opposition supporters, and thus many Ndebele, in distribution of food aid necessitated by his economic policies. Particularly in Matabeleland, historically an opposition stronghold, there have been high levels of unemployment and general social destitution. Although there are no restrictions to who can serve in high office, civil servants in Matabeleland continue to be disproportionately Shona, and do not even speak Ndebele, raising questions of political representation.

Mugabe's ousting in November 2017 by a military coup saw him replaced by his former vice president, Emmerson Mnangagwa. His appointment is regarded with suspicion by many Ndebele due to his alleged complicity in the massacres of Ndebele in Matabeleland in the 1980s; at the time, Mnangagwa was head of the intelligence services.

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