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Jenny Kuhlmann

**Political activism of the
Zimbabwean diaspora:**

opportunities for, and challenges to,
transnational mobilisation





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Political activism of the Zimbabwean diaspora: opportunities for, and challenges to, transnational mobilisation

Jenny Kuhlmann

Background to the study

For a long time research on migration in industrialised countries has concentrated on the impacts of migration, refugees and asylum seekers on Western societies as well as on migrants' integration to their new surroundings. Due to economic and social globalisation processes as well as increased attention for migration flows, however, international migration research has, over the last two decades, gained an increasing interest in cross-border activities and relations between migrants and their home countries, especially with regard to economic and financial contributions of labour migrants (i.e. remittances). Less attention has been paid to the issue of civil society and political activities of refugees, asylum seekers and diaspora communities who leave their countries of origin for rather political reasons (including persecution, crises and conflicts). Taking into account that these migrant groups often remain in their host countries for a substantial period of time without being able to return to their countries of origin but still identifying themselves with the latter and being interested in the dynamics and development processes 'back home', the question needs to be asked how and to what extent these communities (based in their host countries) try to form, influence and change social, economic and particularly political dynamics in their distant home countries. How do they engage in political processes and to what extent can they assert influence? In wanting to pay attention to this issue it must be taken into account that diasporas do not only concentrate their activities directly on their homeland (by supporting opposition parties, for example) but also by lobbying and raising awareness within their host countries. The political environment and legal framework of the host country (such as access to decision makers, asylum policies) matter and influence their potential and capacities of engaging in the domestic politics of their home country from abroad. In sum, research focussing on the effects of diaspora activities on the dynamics of their home countries has concentrated predominantly on financial and economic aspects (especially on the role of migrants' remittances). The civic and political engagement of diasporas in homeland politics, and particularly, the structures and conditions in the home as well as in the host country which affect diaspora politics, have yet to be sufficiently studied. The aim of this study is to address this gap in research. By studying the human rights and political activism of Zimbabweans in Britain it aims at analysing the opportunities for, and challenges to, transnational mobilisation and diaspora politics oriented towards the country of origin, Zimbabwe – a country that has experienced a deterioration of its domestic political and socio-economic situation during the past decade – from the migrants' perspective.¹

1 The research for this paper was conducted in 2008 and thus before the implementation of the Government of National Unity in Zimbabwe. Possible changes affecting Zimbabwean diaspora politics thereafter are thus not covered by this paper.

I. Introduction

The past decade has seen an out-migration from Zimbabwe described as an 'exodus' by a number of scholars and observers (Gaidzwana 1999, Chetsanga & Muchenje 2003, Tevera & Crush 2003, Solidarity Peace Trust 2004, Chikanda 2005, Tevera 2005, McGregor 2007, Pasura 2008). It is estimated that one quarter to one third of the Zimbabwean population (about three to four million) has left the country. The reasons for this mass migration are manifold but relate largely to the unstable economic and political situation in Zimbabwe following the controversial land reform programmes and disputed elections since 2000. The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF)-led government of president Robert Mugabe has responded to political criticism and resistance with intimidation, exclusion and persecution. In the name of safeguarding national interests and territorial sovereignty, democratic rights and freedoms such as the freedom of speech, press, information and assembly have been severely restricted for the political opposition such as the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)², journalists and civil society with the help of new and amended legislation as well as security forces. As a result, the space for divergent opinions within the public social and political sphere and for democratic participation and political pluralism has shrunk significantly. Non-state media, civic and political opposition activities in Zimbabwe have become dangerous (if they can be carried out at all). As a consequence of the deteriorating economic and political situation, a growing number of Zimbabweans have been forced to leave the country and are now residing in countries like South Africa, Botswana, the United Kingdom, North America and Australia. The overwhelming majority is of voting age but outside Zimbabwe not eligible to vote and thus to participate in the most basic political decision-making process of their country. Zimbabweans abroad have therefore searched for other ways of participation in the political life of their home country. Using the alternative democratic space in some of their receiving countries, such as the United Kingdom, politically active Zimbabweans in the diaspora still try to influence domestic political processes in their country of origin through other, non-electoral means. Similarly, (self-)exiled journalists and civil society activists have taken advantage of the freedoms given to them in Britain by making their opinions public, engaging in awareness-raising and continuing to provide information for the international community and Zimbabweans inside and outside Zimbabwe. By operating beyond the borders of the Zimbabwean state, and its authority, these actors circumvent state control and attempt to challenge the government's legitimacy. However, as the research findings of this project indicate, being in diaspora does not only offer opportunities but also poses serious challenges to transnational and diasporic political activities, as will be shown in the following pages.

II. Purpose of the study and central research questions

Against this background the research project aims at investigating the extent to which politically active Zimbabweans in the United Kingdom can use this alternative, diasporic space to influence political processes in their home country. Who are the actors and what are the types, character and scope of

2 The main opposition party in Zimbabwe, the MDC, was founded in 1999 and has its roots in the country's trade union and civil society movement. In 2005, the party split over internal problems and the question of whether or not to boycott the 2005 senatorial elections due to the unlevelled playing field. The major faction, generally referred to as MDC (T), is led by Morgan Tsvangirai while the smaller faction, MDC (M), is led by Arthur Mutambara.

transnational political activities and instruments of the Zimbabwean diaspora in Britain? Furthermore, what are their possible impacts on the political development in Zimbabwe? What are the arenas (e.g. local, national or international level), the contexts (e.g. of the home country, the host country and diaspora internal) as well as the conditions and opportunity structures within the host country (e.g. the political environment, access to political decision makers, asylum policies) under which these activities take place? In sum, the study explores how the diaspora tries to remain part of the domestic political development of its home country and looks into the factors framing the capacities and opportunities for, as well as the challenges and constraints to, (trans)national diaspora politics. It thereby also investigates the question of the extent to which the politically active part of the Zimbabwean diaspora can be considered 'contemporary global forces' – a characteristic ascribed to many diasporas and transnational communities by scholars in the field of transnationalism and diaspora studies.

This paper intends to discuss the preliminary research findings of my PhD project. It is divided into seven parts. The following sections will give an overview of the theoretical framework in which the Zimbabwean diaspora-based political activities can be located. The fourth part presents the actors and a typology of politically active members of the diaspora. This is then followed by an analysis of the nature and characteristics of Zimbabwean diaspora politics. The sixth section discusses the potential for, and challenges to, Zimbabwean diasporic political activism and the last part draws a preliminary conclusion.

III. Theoretical framework of the study: Transnational diaspora politics

From a conventional political perspective the fundamental organising principle of the world is to be found in the system of nation-states, which are understood as sovereign territorial units. Territory is understood as "space with a border that allows effective control of public and political life" (Maier 2006: 34) and thus as the basis for state sovereignty and collective political action. While territories have been centres of identification, places of economic resources and spaces of political authority, power and decision-making, it appears that political as well as economic, cultural and social decision-making processes do not only take place within national territories, but are also influenced by actors such as members of diasporas and transnational communities outside the borders of the nation-state. It has been argued that through processes of migration people extend their activities across the borders of their own state to span several national territories. In such cases, the territory of a nation-state is no longer congruent with the societal and the political space. The kind of exertion of influence through space-spanning networks and activism of diasporas cannot be explained with the conventional nation-state concepts. New spatial relations are opening up and national politics do not simply take place through civic and political commitment and engagement within the state territory.

Literature on migrant and diaspora transnationalism offers a suitable theoretical perspective for exploring and understanding the ways in which diasporas try to remain part of the domestic political community and attempt to transform the politics of their home countries as it sheds light on contemporary globalisation processes contributing to what has been viewed as a disjuncture between the nation-state, territory and the political community. A transnational approach allows us to examine forms of political action taking place outside the frame of the conventional state-centric nation-state model of traditional political research used to analysing political processes and interactions. It makes it possible to theorise and analyse the links between diasporic political activities, the host country context in which they take place and the processes of domestic political change in the home country

as well as how these complex triadic relations are embedded within the context of transnational political spaces. Exploring the political strategies and practices of transnational and diasporic groups helps to broaden our understanding of politics that are neither strictly domestic nor international but take place outside the territorial and legal jurisdiction and sovereignty of the country of origin and thus, beyond the boundaries of a single nation-state, i.e. in a transnational and not simply a local or national space.

However, even though transnational political activities are understood as a challenge to the nation-state, its continuing importance as a geographical centre of social and political power and as a category of analysis cannot be denied (see Risse 2002). Some even note that the nation-state is a precondition for transnational developments (Bommes 2003: 102). That transnational political activism of the Zimbabwean diaspora studied in this project is indeed influenced by states, the country of origin as well as the host country, and that not all diasporas have the total freedom of action sometimes ascribed to them by advocates of the transnational approach becomes apparent in this study.

Transnational political activities and diaspora politics

Migration and diaspora communities are not new subjects of research. However, some scholars have observed a “dramatic growth of diasporas and the intensification of their activities” (Sheffer 2003: 5), which have led to a rise in scholarly interest for the topic over the last two decades. Transnational activities and links which are established and intensified across borders have been described as creating de-territorialised nation-states (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc 1994) as some nations seem partly to decouple from the territory of their states with regard to residence. This is, however, not necessarily so with regard to their practices and activities. These often remain homeland-oriented. Transnational migration has raised the attention of scholars regarding the multifaceted transnational relations between diasporas, their homelands and host countries and on how some migrants and diaspora communities take part in the social, cultural, economic and political developments of their country of origin. Consequently, transnational activities are usually categorised as social, cultural, economic and political (Portes et al. 1999, Al-Ali, Black & Koser 2001a, 2001b).³ Transnational activities have been studied from different perspectives. Vertovec (1999) identified six different ways in which transnationalism has been conceptualised: as a social morphology, as a type of consciousness, as a mode of cultural production, as an avenue of capital, as a site of political engagement and as the reconstruction of place or locality. However, with regard to the fifth perspective, Sheffer (2003: 5) notices a “lack of in-depth studies and comprehensive theoretical discussion of the political discussion of the diaspora phenomenon”.

Described by Itzigsohn (2000) as “new forms of political action [...] that transcend the territorial and political boundaries of states”, transnational political activities of diasporas are traditionally conceptualised as taking place within the framework of triadic relations between the host country, the country of origin and the diaspora itself (e.g. Armstrong 1976, Sheffer 1986, Esman 1986). Al-Ali, Black and Koser (2001b) differentiate between two geographical foci of transnational political activities. The ‘home country focus’ includes participation in elections and membership of political parties – and thus direct participation in the political processes of the home country. The ‘host country focus’, on the other hand, comprises political rallies and demonstrations as well as mobilisation of political contacts in the host country as common activities – and thus indirect participation in the political processes of

³ Though analytically distinguishable these activities are often closely interlinked in reality (e.g. economic support for socio-cultural projects or political parties).

the home country. In many cases, the political activities of diasporas circle around the issue of territory (e.g. fighting for a separate state) or legitimacy of the homeland government.

For Østergaard-Nielsen (2003: 762) political transnational practices are “various forms of direct cross-border participation in the politics of their country of origin by both migrants and refugees (such as voting and other support to political parties, participating in debates in the press), as well as their indirect participation via the political institutions of the host country (or international organisations).” However, Østergaard-Nielsen distinguishes not only between direct and indirect types of activities and thus different channels to exert influence. She also distinguishes between two main forms of transnational political practice, ‘homeland politics’ and ‘immigrant politics’. Immigrant politics concern political activities of migrants and refugees that aim at improving their social, economic and political rights and conditions in the host country. This kind of politics becomes transnational when the country of origin gets involved to support the demands of their nationals abroad. Homeland politics refer to transnational political activities of migrants and refugees in the host country that focus on the domestic or foreign policy of the homeland and can be either of support or in opposition to the homeland government or regime. Diaspora politics, for Østergaard-Nielsen a subset of homeland politics, are confined to groups that are excluded from direct participation in the political system of their country of origin or that do not have a homeland government of their own to support or to oppose. However, Østergaard-Nielsen (2003: 763) notes that “diaspora politics has gained a much wider connotation in line with the recent, more inclusive definitions of the concept of ‘diaspora’ and thus overlaps with the term homeland politics.”

These types of transnational politics of migrants and refugees are not mutually exclusive. In fact, in practice these spheres of political action are often intertwined and cannot be clearly separated from each other. Østergaard-Nielsen (2001: 269) alludes that “while an analytical distinction between immigrant and homeland political agendas is necessary, it is also important to acknowledge how the two agendas overlap and reinforce each other. An immigrant political agenda may have a ‘hidden’ homeland political agenda” or the other way round. Some diaspora activists may be involved in the politics of their country of origin and their host country simultaneously. This is also the case among Zimbabwean activists in the UK. While Østergaard-Nielsen’s typology is undoubtedly a very valuable contribution to the study of transnational politics of migrants and refugees, this study will not consider diaspora politics as a subset of homeland politics. As will be shown, looking at Zimbabwean political activities in the UK, it becomes clear that their transnational dimension is limited in the sense that these activities connect the UK-based diaspora to the home country but hardly to other parts of the overall diaspora elsewhere around the globe. In addition, the diaspora engages in immigrant and homeland politics simultaneously. Consequently, the categorisation that appears more useful for this study is one in which the politics of the diaspora include, on the one hand, homeland and, on the other hand, immigration politics. I will therefore operate with homeland and immigration politics as subsets of (transnational) diaspora politics.

Diasporas: contemporary global forces?

There is no generally accepted academic consensus on the definition of ‘diaspora’. Even suggestions regarding the typology of diaspora communities differ considerably (see e.g. Cohen 1997 and Ember, Ember & Skoggard 2005). Some of the concepts and meanings of diaspora vary significantly and it appears that older concepts of the term as they have been used for the Jewish diaspora do not embrace contemporary diaspora communities and need to be refined (Butler 2001). According to Lahneman, who undertook a survey of scholarly literature on diaspora communities and lists nearly 500 articles,

a diaspora can be defined as “a group that recognizes its separateness based on common ethnicity/nationality, lives in a host country, and maintains some kind of attachment to its home country or homeland” (Lahneman 2005: i). Lahneman adds: “We redefine this definition to include the presence of latent or overt tendencies towards political action” (ibid.). More recent articles on *Asylum and Refugee Diasporas* (Mc Dowell 2005, van Hear 2005, Koser & van Hear 2003), *Chaordic Diasporas* (Webner 2005) and *Long-Distance Nationalism* (Koser 2003, Glick Schiller 2005) also emphasise the political activities of these diaspora types and point out to the diverseness of contemporary diasporas which compared to older ones consist increasingly of asylum seekers and refugees.

Analysing literature dealing with the impact of diasporas on national and global politics, Lahneman (2005:8) found that “[w]hile their actual mobilization characteristics vary extensively, some Diasporas have demonstrated the ability to exert sufficiently focused, organized, and powerful influence to make them significant actors in international affairs.” The report concludes that “Diasporas increasingly exert political influence on their host countries and their countries of origin. In particular, Diaspora groups mobilize in several distinct ways; by sending remittances, supporting ethnic lobbying groups, and disseminating information. Diaspora groups affect the domestic and foreign policies of both host and sending country” (Plotkin 2005: 26). Diaspora groups, especially in North America, have been described as influential actors in the host country’s foreign policy towards their home countries (e.g. Arthur 1991, Shain 1994, Shain 1994/95, Panagakos 1998, Anderson Paul 2000, Shain & Barth 2003). However, the US-based examples of studies on transnational political activities focus predominantly on established or at least well-organised diasporas. The majority of these studies describe diasporas as influential global forces able to utilise opportunities provided by the openness of the US-American political system to ethnic politics and by the accessibility and permeability of this political system, in particular in decision-making processes. Through this they appear to be able to challenge the hegemony of states and to change the situation in their respective home countries by being culturally, economically or even politically active in their host countries.

However, political opportunity structures existing in the United States differ from those elsewhere and in particular from those found in Europe. The accessibility and permeability of the political system found in the United States does not exist to the same degree, for instance, for diasporas in Germany – regardless of their size and degree of organisation and cohesion (e.g. Koopmans & Statham 2001, Ögelman, Money & Martin 2002). Generally, and as demonstrated by Koopmans and Statham (2001), the extent and forms of transnational and diasporic claims-making in European countries are significantly dependent on political opportunities and constraints set by national citizenship and integration regimes. Thus, not only the political and economic context but also the structural conditions and the regulative, administrative and legislative environment matter with regard to framing diasporic agency and spheres of influence. While the observation of diasporas as contemporary global forces might be true for the case of established (labour) diasporas in the US context, which enjoy political power due to their economic power and existing political opportunity structures, the case appears different for many diasporas in European countries. Investigating Turkish and Kurdish diaspora politics in Europe, for instance, Østergaard-Nielsen (2003: 775), argues that “diaspora political lobbying does not redirect foreign policy away from governments’ already defined national interests such as economic or security political relations with the homeland”. In fact, Martiniello and Lafleur (2008) found that even in democratic host countries political opportunity structures vary and that, as a result, the forms of transnational political activity of migrants and diasporans in the United States differ from those in Europe.

In addition, when looking at the diasporas under investigation in the US-based literature, it becomes apparent that only few belong to what in recent years has been termed asylum and refugee diasporas (Koser & van Hear 2003, Mc Dowell 2005, van Hear 2005). These diasporas consist mainly of asylum

seekers who arrived relatively recently and refugees whose legal immigration status as well as living and working conditions and contexts differ from those of established labour diasporas. More recent studies have shifted their attention to such asylum and refugee diasporas, which, like Al-Ali, Black and Koser's (2001a & 2001b) articles on Bosnian and Eritrean refugees in Europe, point to a number of factors that affect such migrant communities' ability to play a significant role as transnational actors in the politics of their homeland. They observe "that refugees can and do engage in a wide range of transnational activities, and thus go some way towards undermining the conceptual distinction that has left them largely excluded from transnational studies. On the other hand, there are limits to their transnationalism, sometimes imposed by their legal status" (Al-Ali, Black & Koser 2001b). Investigating the question of what determines successful diasporic political activities, Al-Ali, Black and Koser (2001b) suggest that the capability of diasporans to participate in transnational political activities depends on certain desires and capacities. Here the latter appears especially important. Capacities which facilitate transnational political activities are a secure legal status, a positive attitude of the host country and its population towards ethnic-national diasporas and political integration of the diaspora by its home government. Thus, not only do the political situation and the circumstances under which people leave their home country matter with regard to their transnational political activities, but also the status of these people as migrants and the political opportunity structures within the host country. As Esman (1992: 3) states: "The legal regimes, institutions, and political cultures of receiving countries confront immigrant communities with variable patterns of constraints, controls, and opportunities."

Hence, "[t]he type of activities and degree of success depends on the political opportunity structure of each host country that do or do not accommodate homeland politics" (Papadopoulou 2003: 355). However, it is not only the conditions of the home country and those of the host country that play a role in this context, but also the composition of the diaspora itself and the internal structures and power dynamics within the migrant community (see also Guarnizo, Portes & Haller 2003) as this paper will show. Drawing on field work⁴ among the Zimbabwean diaspora in the United Kingdom, the aim of the following pages is to identify actors, types and the nature of Zimbabwean diaspora activism as well as those factors that form the conditions for participation in, and the potential of, diasporic political activism to exert influence on developments in the home country.

IV. Actors and typology of diaspora members with regard to political activism

Sociology of Zimbabweans in the diaspora in the United Kingdom

Zimbabweans in Britain show a diversity of characteristics. They comprise students, labour migrants, refugees, (failed) asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and 'naturalised citizens' of the country of residence, i.e. Zimbabweans with British ancestry. Whereas a minority came to Britain during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the country has experienced an increased influx resulting from the aggravated economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe since about 2000 (see Pasura 2008). As such, quite a large part of the diaspora consists of refugees and asylum seekers (asylum seekers whose cases are pending

4 This paper draws on field work conducted between February and December 2008 for my research project entitled 'Transnational political activities of the Zimbabwean diaspora in the United Kingdom'. As further explained below on page 7 it is based on in-depth interviews especially with politically active members of the Zimbabwean diaspora, participant observation, ongoing informal conversations with diasporans and the analysis of (online) media sources and existing relevant studies. As the research is still in process, the conclusions must be viewed cautiously.

or failed asylum seekers) and undocumented migrants.⁵ Indeed, 90 per cent of asylum applications by Zimbabweans are rejected by the British Home Office (see Heath & Jeffries 2005, Heath, Jeffries & Pearce 2006, Bennet, Heath & Jeffries 2007).

Zimbabwean diasporans maintain strong ties with their homeland but vary in their engagement in diaspora politics, especially homeland politics (see Bloch 2005, Pasura 2008). Even though the main and most visible political activism is human rights and opposition activism, diaspora politics include various different voices and there are also other political activists with different political agendas such as anti-opposition and government supporters, tribal secessionist activism and an ominous 'Rhodesian lobby' which, however, do not operate as much in the public sphere as the human rights and political opposition activists do. As this paper does not offer the space to discuss all of these actors, I will concentrate on human rights and political opposition activism.

Typology of activists

In his recent study on the Zimbabwean diaspora in Great Britain, Dominic Pasura (2008) developed a very useful four-fold typology of diaspora members for analysing the modes and degrees of participation in political activism: visible members, epistemic members, *dormant members* and silent members. *Visible members* are those Zimbabweans in diaspora who are most active in the political sphere engaging in political and civil society activism 'on the streets' through demonstrations and protests (e.g. the Zimbabwe Vigil, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Free Zimbabwe Youth, Monday Forum, Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum) and include members of pressure groups, human rights and political organisations and opposition party branches. *Epistemic members* are what Pasura refers to as 'cyberspace' or 'desktop' activists engaging in online discussions about the political and economic future of their home country. Being highly qualified and educated, their methods of engagement and participation in diaspora politics are those of online discussion forums or internet radio debates rather than grassroots political activism 'on the streets'. Furthermore, they attend conferences in order to discuss and influence public opinion. By operating through the internet, this group has built up transnational networks of political activism discussing the politics of the homeland and spanning Britain, South Africa, the US and Zimbabwe (e.g. representatives of online news agency and online broadcasting stations such as NewZimbabwe.com, ZimOnline.co.za, TheZimbabwean.co.uk, ChangeZimbabwe.com, ZimDaily.com, *SW Radio Africa* as well as exiled journalists from the Association of Zimbabwe Journalists). Dormant members, on the other hand, are those that are inactive for reasons such as fear of the Zimbabwean Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), fear of the British Home Office if they are undocumented migrants, overwork due to being breadwinners to increase earnings for

5 The number of undocumented Zimbabwean migrants in the UK is unknown. Existing studies show different results of the possible scope of undocumented migration. While Bloch (2005: 27) in her comparative survey among Zimbabweans in Britain and South Africa only found six per cent of respondents in the UK to be undocumented, a mapping exercise conducted by the International Organisation for Migration on Zimbabweans in the UK states that "the vast majority of Zimbabweans in the UK are undocumented migrants [...] and thus they may be subject to compulsory removals if arrested" hence "it is difficult to access people who spend much of their time trying to avoid detection, trying to be invisible" (Pasura 2006: 4). It is likely that Bloch's research team faced the problem of reluctance of such a hidden population to participate in research; thus, they might not appear in the survey at large. Another point might be that Bloch's survey was carried out at a time (mid-2004) when Zimbabwean influx had just started around three to four years ago and a number of asylum cases had not yet been rejected. British asylum statistics indicate that around 90 per cent of asylum applications by Zimbabweans are rejected. Hence, a high number of 'failed' asylum seekers who have gone 'underground' within the UK is not unlikely. In fact, interviews and informal conversation for this study suggest that a high percentage of those Zimbabweans whose asylum claims were rejected have remained in the UK – either appealing against the court's decision on their case or going underground.

sending remittances to relatives in Zimbabwe (here political activism becomes a low or secondary concern) as well as disillusionment about the lasting crisis in Zimbabwe despite ongoing protest and diaspora activities. Pasura rejects the term 'passive' for this group since "they may remain committed and wired into political and economic events in the country of origin but internal and external factors restrict them from full participation" (ibid: 133). Pasura's findings suggest that undocumented migrants' space for political activism is restricted due to their everyday insecurity. In addition, Pasura observed that regarding political activism, the older diaspora cohorts and those who migrated to Britain for purpose of work rarely engage in diaspora politics. The forth group, the *silent members*, is a minority of Zimbabweans in diaspora who distance themselves from being Zimbabwean. Rather, they adopt an alternative national identity and see themselves as Rhodesians, Zimbabwe-South Africans or Zimbabwe-Jamaicans – the latter two hiding their nationality due to fear of deportation or because of Zimbabwe's bad reputation in Britain. Pasura (2008: 134) observed that "[w]hile visible members and epistemic members are passionate to identify themselves as Zimbabweans and maintaining strong ties to the homeland" the situation is different with silent members who are "unlikely to participate in diasporic activities or develop a commitment to diaspora politics, as they regard themselves as non-Zimbabweans".

The first two groups of this four-fold typology are of particular interest to my study as they are the most active. The following observations and findings are based on field work conducted between February and December 2008 which included semi-structured in-depth interviews with politically active Zimbabweans with key positions in UK-based external opposition party branches and human rights organisations, political pressure groups, the Zimbabwean diasporic (online) media and protest art. Additional interviews were conducted with British respondents linked to social organisations or in service of government institutions and knowledgeable about Zimbabwean political activities in Britain. All in all 44 interviews were conducted. These formal interviews were supplemented by informal conversations and participant observation at selected sites such as demonstrations, social and political information and discussion forums. The study also draws on the analysis of relevant documents and materials such as reports of organisations and (online) news media sources (British national and Zimbabwean national and diasporic newspapers) as well as on existing academic studies.

V. Nature and characteristics of Zimbabwean diaspora politics

Zimbabwean diaspora politics mirror the political landscape of the two main political parties in Zimbabwe, the MDC and ZANU-PF. In addition, during the last harmonised elections of March 2008, supporters of the Simba Makoni project also entered the political arena.⁶ No alternative diaspora opposition party or a government-in-exile⁷ has been formed since it would be discredited as British led, financed or influenced party and not accepted as a genuine national Zimbabwean movement and thus, a target for further accusation of being a helping hand for British re-colonialist ambitions as has been the case with the MDC (see also Pasura 2008). Thus, participation in diaspora politics is restricted either

6 Originally a member of the ruling ZANU PF party, Simba Makoni ran as an independent candidate in the March 2008 presidential elections. The other two candidates were Robert Mugabe (ZANU PF) and Morgan Tsvangirai (MDC). Makoni's decision to compete against Mugabe eventually led to his expulsion from ZANU PF.

7 There exists a group which calls itself *Zimbabwean Government in Exile*. However, this group does not appear to be very active, is marginalised and little known in the diaspora and not recognised by other politically active Zimbabweans as a true government-in-exile.

to supporting the ruling party or the opposition that exists in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwean community participates in diaspora politics in multiple ways and offers a broad organisational landscape with a large number of activist groups that include civic organisations (e.g. solidarity groups, political and civic pressure or protest groups), political party branches, cyber and media activists as well as protest artists (e.g. protest music and theatre).

Why: Purpose and objective of activism – Homeland politics and immigration politics

Due to the composition of the Zimbabwean diaspora, homeland and immigration politics are closely linked and intertwined. Initially, Zimbabwean diaspora politics in the UK were rather homeland-oriented, however, due to the destitute situation of many, especially the failed asylum-seekers, which make up a rather large proportion of Zimbabwean asylum seekers, Zimbabweans started to mobilise around issues of migration and support for asylum cases and migrant rights. In addition, for some asylum seekers regular participation in diaspora homeland politics serves their individual hopes to be granted refugee status by the British Home Office as it proves to the immigration authorities their active commitment for political change in their country of origin and their protest against a government that had made them to leave their home and to seek protection abroad. Zimbabwean diaspora homeland politics in the UK are both institutional and non-institutional. Non-institutional politics can become quite confrontational and aim at putting pressure on not only the British government but also on other African governments – whose embassies are based mainly in London – to speak out and support political change in Zimbabwe. The following will give a rough overview of the main kinds of activities pursued by the key actors in Zimbabwean diaspora activism.

What: Kinds of activities

Human rights activist groups: ‘on the street’ protest, awareness-raising, lobbying and campaigning

It is difficult to draw a clear distinction between civic and political activism within Zimbabwean diaspora homeland activism. Many activists engage in civic solidarity, protest or pressure groups but are at the same time card-carrying members of the opposition or at least support or sympathise with the MDC’s objectives. In addition, the Zimbabwean diaspora has seen the establishment of a number of civic organisations and pressure groups, some of which were initially set up by the MDC (UK). Many are run by members or former members of the MDC (UK). A few others are led by civic activists not aligned to any party structures. These activist groups – some regularly, others sporadically – organise medium and large-scale public meetings, rallies and demonstrations to raise awareness and make their concerns visible to the international community. Some call for sanctions and intervention. Sporadic letter writing and petitioning take place according to the political events within the home country or political statements or actions of foreign, especially African, governments. They aim at pressuring these foreign governments and other international actors like global and regional organisations such as the United Nations or the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to put the Zimbabwean crisis on their agenda or to alter their policies towards the government led by Robert Mugabe. However, serious lobby work targeting individual MPs, policy makers or institutions does not seem to be a common strategy, though it is an activity pursued by some groups. As mentioned earlier, out of necessity, a number of civic groups have also started to include or even concentrate on immigration politics.

Political opposition party branches: fundraising and awareness-raising

Both opposition parties, the MDC (Tsvangirai) and the MDC (Mutambara) have branches in the United Kingdom. In fact, in 2006 the MDC (T) even declared the MDC (T) (UK) a province.⁸ At the time of the research, there were around 15 MDC (M) and around 30 to 40 MDC (T) branches in the UK. Due to the opening of new branches and the dissolving of old ones, the figures are constantly changing. As the diaspora is unable to vote in Zimbabwean elections, the activities of most of these party political branches focus on generating funds and other material resources for the party back home – especially during election campaigns – as well as raising awareness. Membership fees, the selling of membership cards and party regalia as well as fundraising parties generate the financial resources to assist the opposition parties in Zimbabwe. To a limited extent fundraising is also carried out by civic groups, which, in addition, aim at evincing moral support and solidarity for civic and political groups and activists within Zimbabwe and at openly criticising the lack of legitimacy of the government. A different set of activities can be observed with regard to diaspora-based media.

Diaspora-based media: dissemination of information, campaigning and providing space for political discussions

Due to the lack of Zimbabwean print media in the UK, online publications serve as a source of information.⁹ Consequently, diaspora-based online media and especially news reporting play an important role in disseminating information and thereby providing a media space, which offers an alternative view to the state-controlled media within Zimbabwe. However, some websites clearly take side with the opposition and have been labelled as tools for counter-propaganda by some respondents. In general though, the virtual Zimbabwean community provides current news on Zimbabwe, links to relevant web pages and space for discussion in online forums and comments on news articles. With one exception, *SW Radio Africa*, which broadcasts online as well as on multiple short wave frequencies into Zimbabwe, all other UK-based Zimbabwean diaspora radio stations (*Zonet*, *Zimnet*, *Nehanda Radio* etc.) broadcast via the internet, which allows for lower operational costs and fewer legislative hurdles. In fact, broadcasting on multiple short wave frequencies is an expensive activity for *SW Radio Africa*. In addition, the station offers a text message service sending news headlines into Zimbabwe and to Zimbabweans in South Africa via SMS.¹⁰ In July 2008 the station sent 25,000 SMS daily while a further 1,000 people a week asked to be added to the list of receivers (The Independent, 21/07/2008). By March 2009 the number of receivers had increased to 30,000 people who received SMS three times a week which forced the station to stop adding new numbers to their news headline service.¹¹

Despite operating predominantly in English and not in the major Zimbabwean languages, Shona and Ndebele, online newspapers and radios appear to be directed at a Zimbabwean, rather than an

8 The party structures of the MDC are organised into branch, ward, district and provincial structures. The MDC (UK), counts as an external provincial structure.

9 At the time of the research *The Zimbabwean* and *New Zimbabwe* have been the only diaspora newspaper published as hard copies in the UK. Both are also available online.

10 The use of text messages plays an important role as medium of communication among the Zimbabweans in the UK in that it is 'the medium through which they make political and social jokes about the homeland's fast collapsing economy [...] [and] convey messages about meetings, appointments, and social events in the diaspora' (Pasura 2006: 11).

11 On 22 March 2009 *SW Radio Africa* announced on its website: "We are receiving many requests to be added to our SMS news headline service. We very much regret that we are unable to add any more numbers. We send to 30,000 people, three times a week, and do not have the funds to expand this. If you know someone who already receives our news, please try and get them to forward to you. Our sincere apologies to the many people who are emailing in."

international, audience. However, non-Zimbabweans also inform themselves through Zimbabwean diaspora-based online media. Online newspapers and internet radios are consumed relatively widely by Zimbabweans in the UK. However, many Zimbabweans also use international media providers like BBC World or Sky News. Nevertheless, diaspora-based online media contribute to opinion-formation among diasporans and those still in Zimbabwe and could be considered the biggest challenge to the homeland government. The fact that government-critical diaspora-based radio stations such as the UK-based *SW Radio Africa*, the US-based Voice of America (VOA) *Studio 7* and the South Africa-based *Voice of the People* were jammed by the Zimbabwean government allegedly with the help of Chinese technology (VOANews.com, 28/02/2007; SWRadio.com, 01/03/07); that a truck with 60,000 copies of the UK- and South Africa-based government-critical *The Zimbabwean on Sunday* was burnt in May 2008 when it entered Zimbabwe (TheZimbabwean.co.uk, 26/05/2008); and that the government ordered Zimbabweans to take down their satellite dishes under *Operation Dzikisai Madhishi* (Shona for 'pull down your satellite dishes') in mid-2008, suggests that the influence of the media activities of the diaspora are feared by the homeland government.

Protest artists: awareness-raising

While there are a handful of Zimbabwean musicians like Thomas Mapfumo who express their dissatisfaction with the current government in their songs, the number of protest artists in the UK-based diaspora appears to be limited. However, protest musicians such as *Viomak* who, since 2006, has released a protest album every year on Mugabe's birthday, or protest theatre groups like *Theatre Under Fire* who not only criticise the current situation in Zimbabwe but also the way Zimbabwean asylum seekers are treated in British detention centres, engage themselves in raising awareness and reach out to Zimbabweans as well as non-Zimbabweans both in the diaspora and at home.

How: Arena of diaspora politics

As can be deduced from most studies on transnational diasporic activism, the most common activities and addressees of diasporic activism in their respective host countries are to gain support from international actors, to strengthen diplomatic contacts, to do advocacy work, lobbying and disseminating information to politicians of the host country, to collaborate with national and international human rights and other civil society groups and to reach out to the broader public of the host country and beyond. In the case of Zimbabwean activism, most political activities take place on the local level as awareness-raising, protest or information campaigns, in cyber space through information dissemination or forum discussions or as fundraising events organised by local opposition party branches. Advocacy and interaction with British politicians, institutions or organisations or diplomatic representatives of other African states are only a strategy pursued by a handful of activist groups or individuals. Diaspora activism in the international arena is very limited and takes place in form of petition writing. Very few groups possess the financial means to travel to conferences or meetings in order to lobby international or regional African organisations directly and on a more professional level.

Where and how many: Geographical scope and individual dimensions of political activism

Diaspora activism is a phenomenon of bigger cities such as London, Manchester, Birmingham and Bristol. In smaller towns, the concentration of Zimbabwean migrants is small and fear of racism appears to curb public political activities (Pasura 2008). London can be considered the centre of

Zimbabwean diaspora activism that aims at lobbying and raising awareness as it offers better access to British politicians, diplomatic institutions, offices of international organisations and the broader public. Despite this, civic organisations are not restricted to the capital and also MDC (T) UK branches are spread all over the UK while MDC (M) branches were predominantly located in the Northern part of England at the time of the research.

Compared to the number of Zimbabweans currently living in the United Kingdom and to those Zimbabwean migrants who are not politically involved, the number of politically active Zimbabweans in the United Kingdom appears to be very small. As is the case with many other diasporas, a large number of Zimbabwean diaspora members do not actively involve themselves in homeland politics. My observations support the recent research findings of Dominic Pasura (2008) who comes to the conclusion that the majority of Zimbabweans in the UK are dormant members, who are conscious of the political and economic problems yet do not get involved in diaspora politics since they “are more worried about sending remittances and ‘sorting out’ their immigration status than engaging in visible political mobilisation abroad” (ibid: 158).

While the literature on transnational or diasporic political activities often cites factors such as class, gender, age, immigration generation and education as being central in determining the individual participation of migrants in homeland activism (e.g. Guarnizo, Portes & Haller 2003), this can only partly be confirmed for the Zimbabwean diaspora. Here, the capacity for and regularity of participation in political activism within the Zimbabwean diaspora was found to be influenced by several other factors. Some migrants do not become active due to external pressures such as fear of the Zimbabwean CIO or the British Home Office while others engage in political activities for pragmatic reasons, for instance to support their asylum claims, and not for politics itself. As such, the immigration status of the different members of the diaspora and fear of Zimbabwean intelligence activities in the host country seem to have a strong impact on the capacity for and regularity of diasporic political participation as will be discussed in more detail below.

VI. Challenges: opportunities for, and limits to, Zimbabwean diaspora politics

1. Opportunities: democratic space in the host country

Democratic freedom to engage politically

Diaspora politics can be considered as an alternative democratic space, which is restricted for dissenting voices and the political opposition within Zimbabwe. The space given to the Zimbabwean opposition in the UK contrasts sharply with the one available in the homeland, though recent political changes and the formation of the Government of National Unity may alter this situation in the coming months and years. Many respondents mentioned that in Britain opinions and criticism can be made public to the international community, including the condemning of human rights violations, which is considered an important tool for increasing international pressure on the home country's government. Others explained that experiencing and understanding how democratic procedures function in the UK may help Zimbabwe's political restructuring in the future when diasporans return home.

Some Zimbabwean activists have also take advantage of the political opportunities available to them in order to lobby and advocate for their concerns. Through their collective political engagement as well as through their personal stories they have caught the attention of British politicians and the media.

While few have managed to establish relations to British politicians on the national level, many activists use the relatively easy access to local Members of Parliament (MPs) to lobby them with regard to their personal asylum cases and homeland political concerns. Even though Zimbabweans engage in this highly localised form of lobbying more as individuals than as groups, there have in instances been calls on activists to lobby their local MPs as individuals for the collective interests of activist groups. This form of political interaction between political activists and local political actors is perceived by many respondents as effective.

Voting rights

In contrast to their home country, the British host country offers Zimbabwean migrants, who have a secure legal status, the possibility to participate in British local and parliamentary elections as voters. Despite Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth in 2002 and its subsequent withdrawal from the organisation in 2003, Zimbabwean citizens are treated as Commonwealth citizens for the purpose of electoral registration and voting and have thus retained the right to vote in British elections. They qualify for electoral participation as long as they fulfil the usual age and residence requirements for voter registration. However, while this excludes the many Zimbabweans without any type of leave to remain in the United Kingdom, many other Zimbabweans who qualify as voters have not made collective use of this democratic right for homeland political purposes by voting for election candidates who put Zimbabwe on their agenda, for example. A considerable number of informants were not even aware of their voting rights and those who were had voted rather according to other concerns such as the stance of MPs on immigration policies or the war on Iraq. In addition, with regard to local elections what becomes clear when considering the geographical dispersal of Zimbabweans is that even if Zimbabweans entitled to vote in Britain would make use of their voting rights, this strategy may not result in a significant political weight as Zimbabweans are scattered all over the UK. Their potential electoral influence would therefore be very low as Zimbabwean votes would simply drown beneath all other votes.

2. Limits: challenges from within the diaspora

Apathy, infighting and disillusionment

For Zimbabwean asylum seekers who have left their home country due to economic deprivation rather than political persecution, but also for many other Zimbabwean migrants like students, labour migrants, naturalised citizens or refugees, migration serves the purpose of rebuilding life and not mobilising for a political cause. Political apathy, but also disillusionment over a prolonged struggle, infighting and party conflicts have led many to become reluctant to engage in diaspora politics and have made others quit political involvement.¹² Divisions and fragmentation become visible in rivalries within the political opposition and between civic groups and opposition party branches. Personal clashes between leaders within the political structures based in the host country as well as power struggles over leadership positions between leaders and groups in the home country and the diaspora, affect the dynamics of diaspora activism. All in all, this research found that Zimbabwean political activists see a relative lack of trust, cooperation and cogency and too much competition and overlapping agendas as well as opportunism of individual activists and a lack of transparency and misappropriation of

¹² Similar observations were made by Papadopoulou (2003) on Kurdish asylum seekers in Greece.

funds as the main obstacle to their diasporic activism. In addition, at the time of the research there was no official, institutionalised and widely accepted common platform or umbrella organisation for discussing homeland politics and dealing with the challenges of asylum seeking which might bring people together. Furthermore, the political environment within the diaspora is relatively polarised between government and opposition supporters. Thus, while Zimbabweans have a limited choice of political affiliation within the home country, the political diaspora structures do not really open up alternative space for a broader variety of opinions or stances.

Due to political and tribal divisions, the different agendas, disagreement on issues like intervention or sanctions and internal personal tensions, Zimbabwean political and civic activists in the UK have not been able to forge a unity that could offer a powerful basis for large-scale collective action in the form of campaigning and lobbying at the UK national or even international level in order to express their interests as 'Zimbabweans' and pressure for assistance in resolving the crisis in their home country. The shared experience of migration – and for many also the asylum seeking process – is not a uniting force for Zimbabweans in the diaspora. All the above mentioned factors are barriers obstructing the political organisation of Zimbabweans as a group. However, this does not mean that Zimbabwean political activism in the diaspora is dysfunctional, as has been shown earlier in this paper.

Lack of a broad transnational framework for collective action

In the case of Zimbabweans it is not (yet) possible to speak of the existence of broad transnational networks. Within the Zimbabwean diaspora community around the world (with the exception of online activists) transnational dialogue or alliances for common and collective action and transnational political mobilisation have not yet emerged. There appears to be an absence of – or at best only limited – active engagement in transnational political networks, which could mobilise Zimbabweans in the respective host countries to collectively internationalise the Zimbabwean cause and to lobby not only the host governments but also international institutions for support in their struggle. Although a number of individuals of civic organisations in the diaspora communicate with civic groups at home and the MDC (UK) with the MDC in Zimbabwe and even though homeland-based representatives of civic organisations and the MDC meet leaders in the diaspora when coming to the UK for forum discussions or protest events, the extent of concrete, regular and close collaboration appeared rather limited at the time of the research. As a consequence, although the homeland government accuses diaspora activists of being co-opted by Western interests, diaspora activism – with the exception of diaspora-based media – does not seem to be considered a serious threat or powerful force by the government. However, the latter still keeps the activities of the diaspora under surveillance as will be referred to shortly.

3. Limits: Political opportunity structures and environment in the host country

The Zimbabwean diaspora does not operate within a vacuum but within the legal, social, economic and political context of its host country. The UK immigration policies and the public opinion on issues of immigration, the juridical-legislative system, the bureaucratic structures and procedures as well as the lack of access to the political establishment, policy and decision-makers all shape and influence the capability of the Zimbabwean diaspora, which consist to a large degree of (failed) asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, to mobilise around homeland politics. Considering these limitations, as well as the opportunities mentioned above, it becomes clear that it is not so much the diaspora that has a far-reaching impact on the nation-state as it is the nation-state that shapes transnational spaces

and affects transnational diasporic activities and agendas by setting boundaries through its own laws, rules and regulations (see also Al-Ali 2002). As such the structures of the state facilitate as well as hinder diasporic activism.

Asylum and immigration policies as well as public concerns and opinions

As mentioned earlier, the rate of asylum recognition has been very low in the case of Zimbabwean asylum applicants. The majority of asylum applications had either been rejected or were still pending in the time of the research. Application examinations and cases in which rejected applicants lodge an appeal to the decisions on their cases, are processed slowly which leaves a lot of asylum seekers 'in legal limbo' and thus in a situation of vulnerability and insecurity. Undocumented migrants, failed asylum seekers and applicants in limbo are not entitled to a number of rights and opportunities which their counterparts, who have been granted refugee status, can fall back on. For example, when in limbo or rejected, asylum seekers are not permitted to work, which puts them in a sensitive financial situation. Although many engage in informal work despite of this prohibition in order to support their families in Zimbabwe, their earnings are low. In addition, they are not entitled to study under home students' conditions which renders it impossible for most to pay the high university fees and thus limits their educational opportunities. In short, the majority of Zimbabweans have not been in a position to settle in the UK because their lives remain in a state of limbo, leaving many in a situation where they can neither start a new life in the host country nor return to the home country due to the uncertain and difficult circumstances in Zimbabwe. The uncertainty that surrounds their legal status and hence their right to remain in the country permanently can be considered a major factor in restricting asylum seekers' capability to engage in political activism. Many do not want to jeopardise their asylum claims or be discovered without immigration documents and consequently avoid any confrontation with the authorities and any situation that could lead to detention or deportation.

In addition, the British immigration policy of dispersal spreads newly arrived asylum seekers throughout the UK. This scattering makes it complicated for them to come into contact or join existing organisations elsewhere. Furthermore, the majority does not have the financial means to travel from Leeds, for example, to the hotspot of activism: London. Furthermore, for many, winning their asylum cases is a priority, which they concentrate on and devote most of their time to and even lobby their local MPs for. However, as mentioned above, others see political activism as an instrument to gain refugee status and deliberately get involved in political activism to prove to the British authorities that their life would be in danger if forcefully returned to the homeland. The problem mentioned here by many respondents is that as soon as these 'pseudo' activists get their immigration papers and refugee status, they disengage and leave diaspora politics to build up a new life in the host country.

It was the economic, humanitarian and political crisis in Zimbabwe which caused the dispersal but it might be the difficult situation and position of Zimbabwean undocumented migrants and (failed) asylum seekers that will prolong it. Many respondents mentioned that a lot of Zimbabweans are ashamed to go back to Zimbabwe as they return empty-handed in terms of financial gain and educational or professional skills and will not find anything to go back to (such as jobs, educational and health infrastructure). If the social, economic and political reconstruction process of Zimbabwe is to be successful and lasting, the Zimbabwean diaspora including the not (yet) settled migrant communities of asylum seekers have to be included in the development process. A precondition here is to offer the vulnerable segment of the diaspora a sense of political, social and economic security within the host country. This could happen by allowing asylum seekers to get restricted work permits in order to update their professional skills and thus, stop the ongoing process of de-skilling among

Zimbabweans. Additionally, further education should be made available to them so that they will be able to either contribute to Zimbabwe's development by returning home and using their skills or by contributing with money, goods and ideas from abroad or through short term visits in order to offer training to those at home or to work in the home country. Thus, if the UK government has an interest in a stable future for Zimbabwe this might have important implications for the UK's asylum policy. Rather than marginalising asylum seekers, British development assistance could start in Britain itself by empowering and mobilising the potential of the diaspora to face the challenge of rebuilding the home country on its own. Assisting the diaspora would mean to prepare and enable them for a reconstruction of their own making. At the moment, huge productive capacities remain unused.

Access to political decision makers: reluctance of the UK government to engage with the diaspora

Although there have been statements of solidarity by party members across the British political spectrum, actual practical support for the Zimbabwean diaspora and their cause(s) has been limited. A number of MPs proved to be a receptive audience for 'the Zimbabwean issue' but not always active allies at the same time. Nevertheless, some MPs have regularly brought up concerns regarding the Zimbabwean situation in parliament. In general, however, the political opportunity structures in Britain have not allowed many Zimbabwean political or civic activists to knit close ties to the British political establishment. Only a handful of activists have access to British policy- and decision-makers. According to one respondent of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Zimbabwe and one of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, collaboration with the Zimbabwean diaspora is very limited as the diaspora is neither well structured with a common agenda, nor does it offer valuable information on political dynamics in their home country. According to the respondents, the British embassy staff in Zimbabwe is better informed. Other groups have also tried to obtain the support of student and labour unions. While some groups have been successful in forming such solidarity networks, these seem to be of rather sporadic and situational nature.

In sum, the fractured nature, and the fact that the diaspora does not speak with a single voice and common agenda, makes it difficult for each separate group to appear as legitimate (political) representatives of Zimbabweans in the UK. The relative lack of access to the host country's political establishment limits the Zimbabwean diaspora's strategies of political engagement. Even though the Zimbabwean situation is frequently the subject of parliamentary discussions, the focus of British media articles and broadcasting – which have been sympathetic to the people of Zimbabwe and highlighted human rights abuses – lies on Zimbabwe itself, not on Zimbabwean opposition politics within the UK. Within British-Zimbabwean relations the diaspora is bypassed – not least due to the opposition party's representational structures, which will be discussed in the following section.

4. Limits: the impact of the homeland's political structures and dynamics on the diaspora

The nature of the main opposition party's representational structures

As the diaspora is not able to vote in the homeland's elections, it is not crucial for the opposition party leaders at home to win the diaspora's support in this regard. The external party branches, which have been set up by the MDC in the main host countries including the UK during the last decade, serve the restricted role of mobilising financial and material resources for the party at home and to raise awareness. In addition, the nature of the MDC representational structures does not encourage autonomous diasporic advocacy and lobbying activities with regard to the homeland and, consequently, neither

the development of transnational political lobbying campaigns nor cross-border mobilisation. Neither UK party branch leaders nor the chairperson of the MDC (UK) have the mandate to speak on behalf of the MDC in Zimbabwe. Only a separate, London-based official representative appointed by the opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai has permission to engage in quasi diplomatic activities.¹³ Instead, many MDC branches in the United Kingdom, regardless of faction, and civic groups have – due to the unfavourable reception of asylum seekers, the extremely low rate of asylum recognition and limited social and economic opportunity structures for failed asylum seekers and those in limbo – started to focus increasingly on asylum politics and agendas to support their members with their cases.

Splits and prolonged struggle

The prolonged struggle and almost unchanged status-quo of the situation in Zimbabwe, which lasted for almost a decade and only recently started to show signs of change, the split of the opposition party MDC in 2005 as well as party conflicts – some of which were transferred from the home to the host country – have not only left many diasporans reluctant to engage in diaspora politics but have also left long-standing activists demoralised or even made them quit political involvement altogether. Some former MDC (T) activists have moved to support the MDC (M) and the so called Makoni Project in the last national elections. Other former political activists now concentrate exclusively on human rights activism as they have lost faith in all political parties.

The state is watching

The diaspora-homeland relation is characterised by tension and contradictions. On the one hand, being in need of foreign currency, the Zimbabwean government increasingly sees its diaspora as a financial and economic resource. On the other hand, Zimbabweans in diaspora have been presented by national (government-controlled) media as traitors of their own country. As mentioned earlier, an atmosphere of distrust is overshadowing the political activities of the Zimbabwean diaspora. A significant reason for this is the real and perceived presence of the Zimbabwean Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), which keeps the diaspora's activities in the UK under surveillance. The extent to which this happens seems impossible to assess not least due to the nature of intelligence operations. However, this issue was a recurring topic throughout my interviews with civic and political activists as well as journalists who pointed out the destabilising power of the CIO. Even though the CIO presence might be minimal, it has led to a situation of insecurity, rumours and fear in which political activists treat other activists with caution or even distrust as they quickly assume the infiltration of Zimbabwean intelligence agents. Allegations against other activists, which differ in their opinion on certain political aspects, are frequent. Even though the CIO based in the UK is not able to commit the atrocities that have become known from within Zimbabwe, the fear of being under the surveillance of the CIO and the possible consequences for family members back home restrain a number of political activists in their activities. In addition, it distracts Zimbabwean diaspora homeland politics in general and destabilises the political activism. As such, it is an additional factor that prevents the activists from collaborating and acting as a united force. Hence, even though the Zimbabwean state might appear weak and miles away, it still exerts a certain degree of state control over its diaspora population through its intelligence structures.

¹³ This party representative operates independently from the external party branches and does not engage in their grass-roots activities.

VII. Conclusion

Zimbabwean transnational political activism cannot be understood upon the basis of conventional nation-state concepts. As the political community stretches beyond national borders new spatial relations open up. National politics do not simply involve political commitment and engagement within the state territory. We can observe a reconfiguration of the spatiality of domestic politics whereby national politics expand beyond the boundaries of the nation-state into a transnational arena. However, Zimbabwean diaspora politics remain territorialized in a political sense in that its focus and spatial reference point is national and domestic in character. Thus, one could argue domestic politics are no longer just fixed within one state territory but rather territorialized in a flexible, dynamic way. New transnational forms of national politics have developed but have these transnational political spaces generated specific resources and circumstances for political action and transformation?

This paper has drawn on the findings of my recently conducted field work which assessed the types, character, level and scope of as well as challenges to Zimbabwean political activism in the United Kingdom and the means through which Zimbabweans - based in their host country - try to form, influence and change political dynamics in their home country. The paper has shown that politically active Zimbabweans in Britain engage in a range of activities aimed at influencing domestic politics, and particularly at promoting a change in the political leadership of their country. These activities include political mobilisation within the diaspora, lobbying and awareness-raising in the host country as well as mobilising material resources to support government-critical actors in the home country. Within the literature on transnational diaspora politics it has been argued that diaspora communities and their transnational activities pose a challenge to the state and its position in contemporary world politics. Often, the power and influence of non-state actors who operate outside and across the borders of nation-states are described as significantly affecting state institutions and interests. However, the findings of this research indicate that the thesis of diasporas as 'contemporary global forces', which has been established largely by studying labour diasporas in the US-American context, only holds true to a certain extent for the Zimbabwean diaspora in the UK, which consists to a large degree of undocumented migrants and (failed) asylum seekers. Although politically active diasporans use the democratic space in their host country for their goals, their role and agency in local, national and global politics are shaped by a number of factors which relate particularly to the heterogeneous composition of the diaspora itself but also to the complexity of host and home country actors and structures. Not only do a) diaspora-internal aspects such as power struggles and internal disunity, the insecurity of legal status and lack of resources affect the mobilisation capacity of diaspora homeland politics, but also external factors like b) the host country's legal and political framework and access to decision-makers and c) the lack of absentee voting rights, the home government's strategies of controlling and destabilising the politically active part of the diaspora through intelligence agents as well as the main opposition party's representational structures, which discourage autonomous political activities in the diaspora. All this has implications for the capacity and potential of the diaspora to become a more significant external (trans)national force.

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