

Ndebele

Profile

With about 14 per cent of the population (16 per cent if the affiliated Kalanga are included), Ndebele are Zimbabwe's largest minority (data: CIA World Factbook, 2006 edition). 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 prominence also derives from their history of 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 civilian Ndebele 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.

Current issues

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.

In recent years Mugabe has discriminated against opposition supporters, and thus many Ndebele, in distribution of food aid necessitated by his economic policies. The Minorities At Risk project notes that “There is massive unemployment and general social destitution in the area. Furthermore, although there are no restrictions to high office, civil servants in Matabeleland are disproportionately Shona, and do not even speak Ndebele”.

Matabele-land is an opposition strong-hold. MAR reports that in 2002, prior to the elections, ZANU-PF allegedly threatened the Ndebele with starvation, and a document surfaced which allegedly contained a plan to exterminate the Ndebele. In the heightened tensions in the run-up to the Spring 2008 elections, similar incidents may yet occur.

The leadership of the MDC – now split – has been Shona, in the shape of veteran leader, Morgan Tsvangirai and now the breakaway leader, Arthur Mutambara. But there has always been a strong contingent of Ndebele in the senior ranks of the MDC. The 2006 split within the MDC further emphasized the opposition’s ethnic dimensions, with the Ndebele led by Secretary-General, Welshman Ncube, generally siding with the Mutambara faction.