CHAPTER 3

THE QUEST FOR A DELICATE BALANCE: ZIMBABWE'S FRAGILE MODEL OF DEVOLUTION

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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, devolved systems of government have been implemented in several countries across the globe. They range from the United Kingdom's system of devolution of powers to the regional governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to African countries such as Kenya, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia. Different reasons have informed the adoption of devolution at different episodes, leading to varieties in the version of devolution pursued. Some of the commonly cited reasons for the devolutionary trend include the need to deepen democracy, and improve citizen participation, enhance development, accountability, transparency, allocative efficiency and responsiveness (Steytler, 2005, in Maluwa, 2005; Chigwata, 2018; Rodriguez & Bwire, 2003).

In line with the global and regional developments, Zimbabwe adopted a new constitution in 2013, the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013, hereinafter referred to as the CoZ (2013). The CoZ (2013) ushered in some radical reforms that sought to alter the balance of power between the centre and subnational governments. This new constitution came as a result of the constitutional negotiations that followed a disputed presidential election in 2008 that plunged Zimbabwe into a political crisis. A major breakthrough of this new constitution has been the introduction of a devolved system of government represented at three tiers – national, provincial and local government. According to the CoZ (2013) (section 264(2)), the devolved system of government seeks to:

- Give powers of local governance to the local people and enhance their participation in the exercise of the powers of the State and in making decisions affecting them.

- Promote democratic, effective, transparent, accountable and coherent government in Zimbabwe as a whole.

- Preserve and foster the peace, national unity and indivisibility of Zimbabwe.
- Recognise the right of communities to manage their own affairs and to further their development.
- Ensure the equitable sharing of local and national resources.
- Transfer responsibilities and resources from the national government in order to establish a sound financial base for each provincial and metropolitan council and local authority.

The adoption and constitutional recognition of devolution have been heralded as a historic milestone in Zimbabwe's pursuit of decentralisation reforms.

After nearly five years of non-implementation of devolution, the new government of President Mnangagwa that came to power in 2017 has openly committed to implementing the devolved system of government. In line with this commitment, the word 'devolution' has turned into a mantra associated with the new government since the campaign period of the July 2018 watershed election. While the Mnangagwa government has pursued this mantra with gusto, there is one problem – much confusion engulfs the very meaning of the system, its imperatives and application in the Zimbabwean context. This confusion is not unique to Zimbabwe. It stems from the fact that worldwide, there are varieties of multi-level systems of government. Firstly, there is federalism, which is defined as a system of government in which there is a constitutional power-sharing arrangement that involves both shared rule and self-rule (Chigwata, 2018). Some notable examples include Germany, Ethiopia, Nigeria and India (Bulmer, 2017). Secondly, there are quasi-federal systems that represent an intermediate government system that combines elements of federalism and a unitary state (De Visser, 2005). A notable example of a quasi-federal system is India, which has a constitution with elements of both federalism and a unitary state (Menon & Hartz-Karp, 2019). Against this backdrop, the question that arises is: what are the main features of Zimbabwe's model of devolution and what does this mean in terms of the trajectory of public policy in the country?

This chapter seeks to address the preceding question, arguing that Zimbabwe's model is a delicate balance between subnational autonomy and strong central control. The author argues that this model mirrors the competing forces that were at play during the constitution-making process and the difficult compromises that were made on the subject of devolution. This model of devolution is fragile in the sense that the spirit of the CoZ (2013) raises people's expectations through its democratic, developmental, inclusive and peace-building visions that are grounded in territorial autonomy. Be that as it may, the letter of the CoZ (2013) is inadequate to meet the ambitious vision of the system since the central government only loses bits and pieces of its power. Therefore,