



**THE POPULAR QUEST FOR DEVOLUTION IN ZIMBABWE**

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**Two Views of Devolution**

Since the installation of the Parliamentary Constitution Select Committee (COPAC) in 2009, the word ‘devolution’ has been one of the buzz words in the country. It is a contentious, emotive and divisive issue with strong regional overtones. It is also a frequently misunderstood and sometimes deliberately distorted term. Technically, devolution is a transfer or delegation of power by an upper level of government (often central level) to lower units of governance, e.g., provincial and local governments. Devolution does not mean federalism where each tier has constitutionally protected areas of power. In devolution, the central authority that grants power can in principle revoke what it grants and the grantee (the devolved government) remains constitutionally subordinate to the power giver. COPAC, which spearheaded public consultations on the new constitution, came up with 26 “talking points,” one of which promoted devolution, which was defined as a situation “whereby in a unitary system, political and administrative power is shared between a national government and lower spheres of the state, for example, provinces and local authorities.”

In Zimbabwe, two major schools of thought on devolution stand in sharp opposition to each other. One school is advanced by the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and it condemns a devolved system of government in the country because it would “divide the country into small pieces and because it will cause disunity among our people.” This argument is best articulated by the party’s leader, President Robert Mugabe. To him: “Those things are done in big countries, not a small country like ours... Some are talking about separating Matabeleland region to become a country; that is impossible we don’t want that” (*NewsDay*, 14 March, 2012).

The second school is vocally articulated by the two Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formations, the MDC-T led by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and the MDC-M of Welshman Ncube. Tsvangirai disagrees with Mugabe:

Devolution does not mean secession. It does not mean separation. It is not about tribalism. It is about sharing the national cake equally. Devolution must now become a reality. We cannot have a situation where some people feel that the centre is taking everything (quoted in VOA Studio 7, August 3, 2010).

Ncube is even more vociferous on the matter:

You (the masses) spoke clearly that you want devolution of power; it is captured in the COPAC reports that you want power to be spread to the lower structures. Now, ZANU-PF, who are well known for their record of violating the will of the people, are saying, they don’t want devolution of power. No, no, no! [President] Mugabe and his ZANU-PF will not be allowed to get away with this. We won’t allow that (MDC President Welshman Ncube – [mdczim.net](http://mdczim.net), March 25, 2012)

Given these two sharply contrasting views, how did COPAC navigate on this sensitive issue with a view to reconciling the competing perspectives? The Select Committee’s draft constitution provides the answer.

### **The COPAC Draft and Devolution**

After more than three years of a contentious constitution-making process, COPAC finally produced its first official draft in July 2012 which, in Chapter 14, provided for ‘devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities’. According to the draft’s Section 14.1.1:

Whenever appropriate, governmental powers and responsibilities must be devolved to provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities which are competent to carry out those responsibilities efficiently and effectively.

COPAC provides a six-point rationale for embracing devolution:

- (a) to give powers of local governance to the people and enhance their participation in the exercise of the powers of the State and in making decisions affecting them;
- (b) to promote democratic, effective, transparent, accountable and coherent government of Zimbabwe as a whole;
- (c) to preserve and foster the peace, national unity and indivisibility of Zimbabwe;
- (d) to recognize the right of communities to manage their own affairs and to further their development;
- (e) to ensure the equitable sharing of local and national resources; and
- (f) to 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 views of the principal political players and those of COPAC have been outlined above. The missing link in the debate is the opinion of the public. Afrobarometer conducted a survey to seek this opinion.

### **Afrobarometer Surveys**

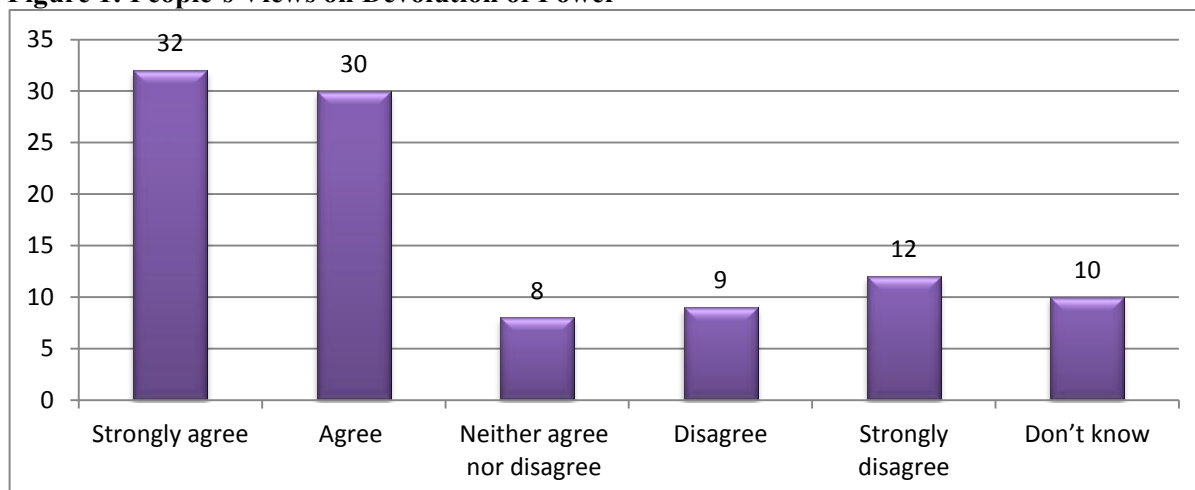
The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys, covering up to 35 African countries in Round 5 (2011-2013). It measures public attitudes on democracy and its alternatives, evaluations of the quality of governance and economic performance. In addition, the survey assesses the views of the electorate on critical political issues in the surveyed countries. The Afrobarometer’s main goal is to produce scientifically reliable data on public opinion in Africa while strengthening institutional capacities for survey research, and sharing research findings to inform policy and practice. The Afrobarometer also provides comparisons over time, as four rounds of surveys have been held from 1999 to 2008 and Round 5 is currently underway.

Afrobarometer surveys use a common survey instrument and methodology. The instrument asks a standard set of questions that permits systematic comparison in public attitudes across countries over time. The methodology was based on a national probability sample of 2400 adult Zimbabweans selected to represent all adult citizens of voting age, allowing for inferences with a margin of sampling error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. The sample was drawn randomly based on Probability Proportionate to Population Size (PPPS), thus taking account of population distributions, gender as well as rural-urban divides. The sampling process ensured that every adult Zimbabwean citizen had an equal and known chance of being selected in the sample. Fieldwork in Zimbabwe was conducted by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), between 16 and 30 July 2012.

### **Devolution in Zimbabwe: The People’s Voice**

In order to explore this issue, the Afrobarometer Round 5 survey asked respondents: “Do you agree or disagree with the proposed constitutional provision to devolve power, from the central government to governments at a sub-national level, such as a local or provincial government, or haven’t you heard enough about it to say?”

**Figure 1: People’s Views on Devolution of Power**



By a three to one margin (62% to 21%), adult Zimbabweans favour a devolved governmental structure and think that this ought to be enshrined in the country’s supreme law (Figure 1). Another 8% are ambivalent and could neither agree nor disagree, while one in ten respondents professed ignorance on the matter.

There are no significant differences between men and women, but we do find a yawning urban/rural divide in attitudes on this matter (Table 1). While more than three quarters (77%) of urban residents say they agree or strongly agree with a proposed constitutional provision to devolve power to the periphery, only a slim majority of 54% share this position in the rural areas, while twice as many rural compared to urban respondents reject devolution (25% versus 13%). Not unexpectedly, a significant minority (13%) of the rural folk pleaded ignorance on the matter, compared to just 3% of their urban counterparts. Though it is not clear what explains the huge rural-urban gap in attitudes on devolution, we speculate that this may result from the alleged ‘coaching’ that ZANU-PF undertook during the COPAC public consultations, whereby the party directed that people must reject devolution during the COPAC meetings. Such ‘coaching’ was far more intense in rural than in urban areas.

**Table 1: Support for Devolution, by Gender and Place of Residence**

	Urban	Rural	Male	Female	Total
Agree/strongly agree	77	54	62	62	62
Disagree/strongly disagree	13	25	21	20	21
Neither agree nor disagree	7	8	8	7	8
Don't know / Haven't heard enough	3	13	10	11	10

Provincial analysis of the data shows that clear majorities in seven out of Zimbabwe’s ten administrative provinces want to see a devolved state in Zimbabwe (Table 2). Perched at the top of the ladder in terms of supporting devolution is metropolitan Bulawayo where an overwhelming majority of 94% endorsed it, 78% of which “strongly agreed”. This is not surprising given that Bulawayo – and indeed the whole of Matabeleland region – constitutes the epicentre of devolution sentiment. In second place is another metropolitan province, Harare in Mashonaland region, where 83% gave a thumbs-up to the concept.

The three provinces where devolution was rejected are Mashonaland Central (47% support), Manicaland (37%) and Masvingo, where just a quarter (26%) endorsed the idea while a large plurality of 38% claimed ignorance on the matter. It should be noted that Masvingo was the province where the controversial ZANU-PF aligned war veterans leader, Jabulani Sibanda, physically relocated for more than a year, ostensibly to embark on political ‘re-education’ campaigns, teaching the people there about the liberation struggle and its values, including denouncing devolution.

**Table 2: Support for Devolution, by Province**

	Agree/Strongly agree	Disagree/Strongly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Don't know
Bulawayo	94	1	3	3
Harare	83	11	5	1
Matabeleland North	75	8	9	9
Mashonaland West	71	12	16	1
Mashonaland East	69	19	7	5
Matabeleland South	69	23	3	4
Midlands	57	13	14	16
Mashonaland Central	47	37	3	13
Manicaland	37	49	6	8
Masvingo	26	29	7	38

A regional/provincial breakdown of responses on devolution does not necessarily coincide with ethnic attitudes on the same theme. Broadly speaking, there are two major ethnic groups in Zimbabwe: the Shona mostly in northern, eastern, and southern Zimbabwe; and Ndebele groups that are settled mostly in western and south western Zimbabwe.

**Figure 2: Attitudes towards Devolution, by Ethnic Groups**

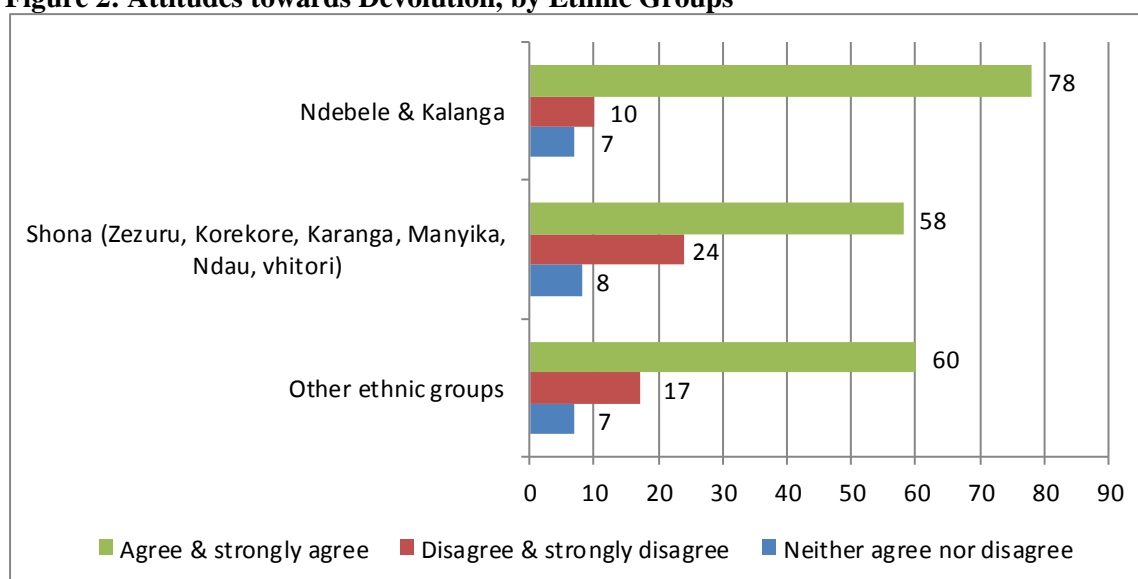
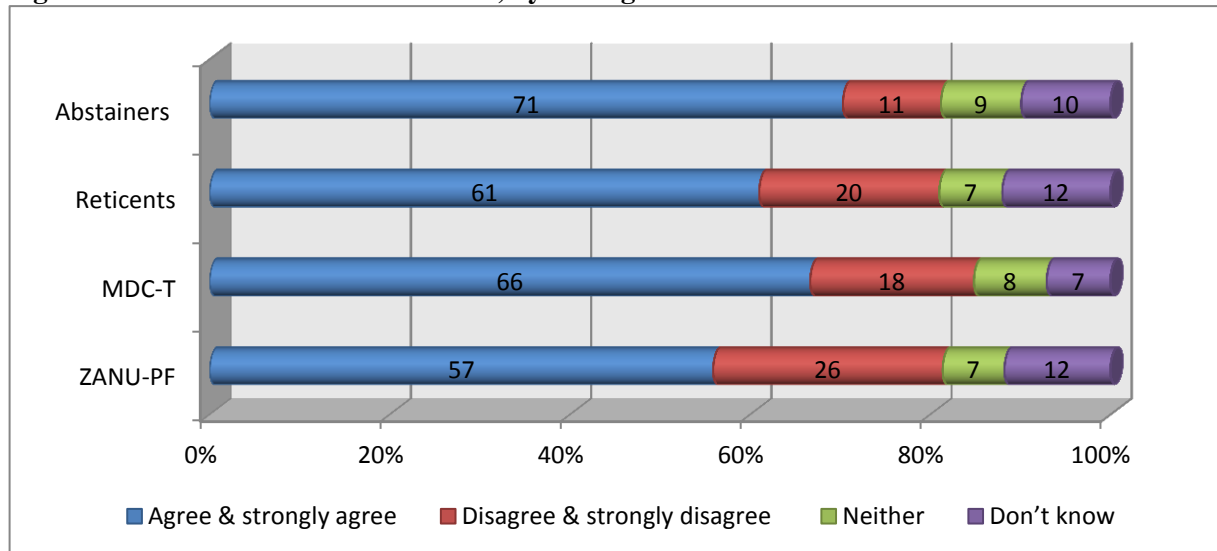


Figure 2 displays the preferences of the ethnic groups and it is clear that the Ndebele and their Kalanga cousins are the strongest supporters of devolution with more than three quarters (78%) of them stating their preference for a devolved system of government. Though 20 points less than their Ndebele/Kalanga counterparts, the broad Shona group also supports devolution by a significant majority (58%). In fact, Figure 2 shows that all ethnic groups are in favour of devolution, including minority ethnic groups (60%) that are scattered throughout the country's ten provinces. Thus, the survey results debunk the widely circulated myth of sharply divided public opinion on this matter and that this division is along ethnic lines.

Does party affiliation have a bearing on how the issue of devolution is perceived? In fact, there is a partisan gap of 9 percentage points in support for devolution separating ZANU-PF supporters (57%) from MDC-T voters (66%). The partisan divide is really not surprising given the very strong opposing policy positions of the two major parties on this contentious issue. What in fact is surprising and particularly significant is that though their party and their leader stringently reject devolution, a

majority of the ZANU-PF support base actually supports the concept. Could this be speaking to a disconnect between the party leadership and its followers? Support for devolution is also high among abstainers 71% of whom lend their support but it is most depressed among the reticent voters.

**Figure 3: Attitudes towards Devolution, by Voting Intentions**



Education also matters. Majorities support devolution across all educational groups, even among those with no formal schooling (Table 3). But support steadily increases with education, from 54% for those without formal education, to 67% among high school certificate holders, 69% among university students and post graduates. It is not clear how the linkage arises but presumably, education sharpens the appreciation of the potential benefits of devolution, at least at the conceptual level.

**Table 3: Attitudes towards Devolution, by Education**

	Agree/strongly agree	Disagree/strongly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Don't know
No formal schooling ( <i>N</i> =96)	54	18	11	18
Primary school completed ( <i>N</i> =360)	58	24	8	10
Secondary school completed/high school ( <i>N</i> =648)	67	22	5	7
Post-secondary qualifications, not university ( <i>N</i> =216)	75	12	10	3
Some university + ( <i>N</i> =120)	69	17	13	1

Finally, we explore the connection between age and attitudes to devolution. The general trend is that support for devolution declines with age. Of the four age groups, endorsement for devolution declines from 64% among the youths (18-30 years) and 65% among the lower middle-aged (31-45 years) to 57% among the older generation (46-60 years) and reaches its lowest level of 54% among the elderly (61+ years). It is not clear why this pattern occurs except that ZANU-PF – especially its president – has linked devolution to the old Federation of Southern Africa, an entity that the elders remember with little nostalgia.

### Conclusion

Zimbabweans have spoken truth to power. They are, by a respectable majority, for devolution of power in the country's supreme law. Even a majority of ZANU-PF members – a party that at least at the leadership level is a bastion of anti-devolutionist thinking – endorses the concept of vertically sharing power between the centre and lower tiers of government. To this extent, the party is on the

wrong side of public opinion, including opinion among its own members; it is running against the tide.

This bulletin comes at a strategic time when the COPAC window is still open, although the process is nearing its terminal stages. If the new constitution is to be a ‘people-driven’ charter, then it ought to capture this critical component of what the people want, and what they want is a constitutional provision to devolve power beyond the capital, Harare.

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