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## **Looking at democratization through the lens of the elite-driven theory in the case of Zimbabwe in 2008.**

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**Title: Looking at democratization through the lens of the elite-driven theory in the case  
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**Abstract:**

Despite the upward trend of democratization since the mid-1970s, there are still many countries that are struggling to make the transition from autocracy to democracy. One of these countries is Zimbabwe. In 2008, Zimbabwe appeared to be on the brink of democratic change. This thesis investigates why these democratic changes did not materialize by analyzing the situation through the lens of the elite-driven *theory of democratization*. Using the qualitative research methods and theory building, this thesis can further develop the elite-driven theory of democratization and simultaneously investigate the puzzle of the Zimbabwean case.

of within case theory building, this project develops both the elite-driven theory of democratization and investigates the puzzle of the Zimbabwean case. Conceptually, the project finds that the elite-driven theory lacks concrete empirical indicators and expectations which makes it an incomplete theory to use for investigating real-life cases. With regards to Zimbabwe, this project finds that democratization led by the elite did not occur in 2008 because the theoretical conditions did not materialize themselves as expected. Additionally, the project also finds that democratization is not a rational choice for elites and if they are given any other alternative that can protect their collective wealth and power then they will not encourage democracy.

*Keywords: Democratization, Autocracy, regime change, Zimbabwe, elites, democracy, elitism.*

## Table of Contents

|                                                           |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>INTRODUCTION:</b>                                      | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>FRAMING THE PUZZLE:</b>                                | <b>7</b>  |
| <i>THE BIRTH OF THE ELITE THEORY</i>                      | 7         |
| <i>ELITE-DRIVEN THEORY AS A THEORY OF DEMOCRATIZATION</i> | 9         |
| <i>THE DEMOCRATIZATION CONVERSATION</i>                   | 12        |
| <b>RESEARCH DESIGN:</b>                                   | <b>12</b> |
| <i>THEORY BUILDING AS A METHODOLOGICAL CHOICE</i>         | 13        |
| <i>DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS</i>                       | 14        |
| <i>JUSTIFICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS:</i>                    | 15        |
| <b>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:</b>                             | <b>16</b> |
| <i>CONDITION 1: ECONOMIC CRISIS</i>                       | 18        |
| <i>CONDITION 2: HIGH RISK OF REVOLUTION</i>               | 18        |
| <i>CONDITION 3: ELITE UNCERTAINTY</i>                     | 19        |
| <i>THE CAUSAL PROCESS</i>                                 | 19        |
| <b>ANALYSIS:</b>                                          | <b>20</b> |
| <i>CONDITION 1: ECONOMIC CRISIS</i>                       | 21        |
| <i>CONDITION 2: HIGH RISK OF REVOLUTION</i>               | 23        |
| <i>CONDITION 3: ELITE UNCERTAINTY</i>                     | 25        |
| <i>THE HAIL MARY THAT WAS THE GNU</i>                     | 27        |
| <i>WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?</i>                               | 28        |
| <b>CONCLUSION:</b>                                        | <b>29</b> |
| <b>DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH</b>    | <b>30</b> |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>                                       | <b>33</b> |

*Research Question: “Why did Zimbabwe fail to democratize in the opportune moment of 2008?”*

*Looking through the lens of the elite-driven theory of democratization.*

## **Introduction:**

Democratization has become a puzzle in the political arena, with many theorists postulating the best ways for countries to democratize. While there have been rather successful waves of democratization in the 1970s and then again around 2011, there are still many (primarily non-Western countries) struggling to democratize. That is the puzzle this thesis aims to engage with. One of the two main objectives of this thesis is to add to the existing literature on democratization by assessing and developing the *elite-driven theory of democratization*. The second main objective of this case is to understand the case of Zimbabwe and why democratization failed to occur in 2008.

After an overview of democratization literature, the elite-driven theoretical framework seems to be the most applicable for African contexts because of the way elites have become dominant in most African countries. As explained by Pieter Labuschagne, during colonization, elite alliances of the black majority were formed in all African countries and these alliances only became stronger after independence. The elite alliances which were solidified post-independence alienated the peasantry and working class in most Sub-Saharan African countries, which left elite groups with the majority of the political decision-making power (Labuschagne, 2002, pp. 70-71) (Osei, 2018). If elites hold all the power, then it can be assumed that they would be the best suited to lead regime change. Hence, the decision to focus on the elite-driven theory of democratization.

The elite-driven theory postulates that because of how representative democracy has developed, elites in society have the power to stimulate regime change (Moyo, 2014). Theorists of the elite-driven theory believe that the desire by elites for democracy is the best way that a country could democratize. It is argued that when the cost of autocracy becomes too high for

the elite group, then they will push for democratization to occur, making the likelihood of democratization higher (Albertus and Gay, 2016, p. 2). There is an array of examples of where this theory has materialized in Western contexts e.g., in Great Britain, however, the theory has not been practically and empirically considered in an African context (Schmitter 2017, p. 4). Hence the focus of this thesis on Zimbabwe.

To build on this theory and understand the case of Zimbabwe, this thesis uses the qualitative method of within-case theory building. The method of theory building in tandem with the case of Zimbabwe is used because, in 2008, Zimbabwe seemed to be the ideal case for democratization led by elites to occur, however, this did not happen. Therefore, the case of Zimbabwe indicates some shortcomings or deficiencies in the theory which – if investigated, can lead to the development of a more practical democratization theory.

Firstly, however, there seems to be no unanimous definition of ‘elites’ (Osei, 2018). However, the elites that came out of colonization, could be stratified into three categories: military elites (freedom fighters); economic elites (landowners), and political elites (new members of government). Nevertheless, due to the corrupt and nepotistic way politics has developed post-independence, these groups have become intertwined in many countries (Osei, 2018, p. 23). As explained by Osei, the typical “big man,” holds all three forms of power and influence (Osei, 2018, p. 23). For example, Constantino Chiwenga was the Minister of Defense and Army in Zimbabwe from 2017-to 2016; is currently the Vice President of Zimbabwe and minister of Health; the owner of multiple businesses that are important in the Zimbabwean economy. Additionally, although economic, ruling, and military elites have all derived their power from different sources, they all share the same common ability to influence (political) decisions within a country. Therefore, in this thesis, they will be taken as one large group. Using a definition close to that of Osei’s, this thesis considers elites to be any member of the society who has the ability, from their strategic position and/or wealth to influence political,

social, and economic outcomes. While the profile of all these groups of elites may be different, they converge in their goals of survival and an increase in group wealth and power. It should be noted that just like Thompson (1990), this thesis affirms that the ruling groups in Africa are a coalition of all of these elitist groups rather than a “homogenous, consolidated class” (Labuschagne, 2002, p. 72).

For context, 2008 was a tumultuous year for Zimbabwean politics. The country was on the verge of a sociopolitical revolution and the citizens had mostly given up on the incumbent government. As will be explained in detail in the theory section below, these characteristics have been described as the necessary characteristics that should be present for democratization led by the elite to take place. However, despite the (surface) presence of all these characteristics, democratization did not occur. Thus, making Zimbabwe a natural puzzle concerning the elite theory of democratization. Therefore, this project will look at this particular case in Zimbabwe to investigate *why* the theory did not unfold as expected. As such, this project aims to answer the main research question: “*Why did Zimbabwe fail to democratize in the opportune moment of 2008?*” Not only will theory-building be the outcome of this thesis, but it also aims to understand the case of Zimbabwe to see how it can escape autocratic rule in the future. It is easier to investigate the case within the confines of an established and confirmed theoretical framework. Hence, the decisions taken for this specific thesis.

In addition, this theory has also been chosen over other democratization theories because it has a natural puzzle in how it unfolds. Logically, elites would be opposed to democracy because they can profit more in a society where choices are not controlled by the median voter (Albertus and Gay, 2016). This is because, in democratic societies, the poor would impose higher taxes on the rich, naturally making the poor pro-democracy and the rich/elite anti-democracy (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2001, 938). However, scholars have found that there are certain characteristics (i.e., the causal mechanisms) that could go as far as pushing

elites in favor of democratic rule. This natural puzzle makes this theory an interesting choice when considering democratization theories.

This thesis will first begin with an overview of the existing literature that has developed the elite theory of democratization. In so doing, the reader will be able to place this thesis in the conversation of democratization as well as get an overview of how the theory has been developing over time. Next, the thesis will explain the methods that were used to both develop a theoretical framework and to analyze the case of Zimbabwe. This section will explain why theory building is the most appropriate methodological choice. Then, using existing literature, the next section will create and solidify the theoretical framework used throughout this project. After that has been established, there will be the analysis section which will delve into the empirical data of Zimbabwe and answer the main research question of this project through the lens of the elite-driven theory. Lastly, there will be the conclusion of the findings of this project, followed by a discussion section on the insights that this project offers and some suggestions for further research.

### **Framing the Puzzle:**

#### *The birth of the elite theory*

The elite theory of democratization was born out of the *elite theory*. Elite theory as a broad theoretical framework has a long history in political theory. As far back as Max Weber and Charles Wright Mills, there was the theorization that there is a minority group in all societies which holds the most power and political decision-making capabilities (Lopez, 2013, p. 4).<sup>1</sup> Elite theory and democratization only began to be fused during the third wave of democratization. Elite theorists were trying to understand what led to the democratization in previously autocratic countries where the conditions thought to be needed for democracy were

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<sup>1</sup> See (Weber, 2005 [1922]: 695) for more information as his framework is a basis for the modern-day elite theory.

missing. In South America, Eastern Europe, and parts of Africa, the conceived conditions for democracy such as modernization, equality, economic openness, etc., all seemed to be missing yet, countries were still democratizing (Albertus and Gay, 2016, p. 3). This was when theorists began to see a pattern of elites as a catalyst for regime change. Authors such as Albertus and Gay argue(d) (2016) that an explanation for the democratization of these cases can be found in the elite's desire to democratize. Theorists who have investigated this topic and agree that elites were the catalysts for change include Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman (2006); Benjamin Smith and Daniel Triesman (2005). These theorists gave birth to the elite-driven theory of democratization.

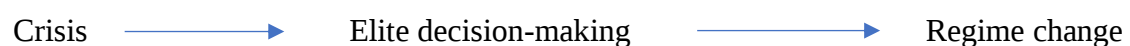
There are three distinct groups of elite theorists, which include radical, traditional, and contemporary elite theorists. Radical elite theorists and to a large extent classical elite theorists believe that democracy (as the government of the people by the people [or *demos*]) is impossible because society is necessarily elite-driven. This notion was expressed in Pareto's (1935) '*Law of elite circulation*' and Mosca's (1939) '*Notion of political class.*' This radical belief that politics is essentially a game of the elites for the elites is a popular one, however, it is not a view that adds constructively to the democratization conversation, therefore, it will not be considered in this thesis.

While Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto are the fathers of democratic elitism, there was no consensus on what it meant until Joseph Schumpeter theorized 'democratic elitism' in 1941 (Pakulski, 2012, p. 10). Schumpeter (1941) went against classical elitists and stated that democracy and elitism could be reconciled as one and as such, elites could be useful to democracy and democratization. Schumpeter's work began the shift in what is now known as the new paradigm of elite theory, which looks at elite power as a tool for regime change (Lopez, 2013, p. 4). The theoretical argument this thesis is based on is primarily from the work of theorists in the new elite theory paradigm. The authors primarily used in this project such as

John Higley, are seen as the leaders of contemporary elite theory. Higley specifically, drew attention to this paradigm in the the1920s and 30s when he identified elites as agents of social and political change (Pakulski, 2012, p. 9). He had a host of collaborations with other theorists which explained the role of elites in political change: (Field and Higley 1973); (Higley and Burton 1990); Higley and Gunther 1992); (Higley, Pakulski and Wesolowski 1998); (Higley and Pakulski 2000); (Best and Higley 2010). Higley's work, explains fundamentally, that because of the elite's strategic networks and resources they hold the power to influence politics (Pakulski, 2012, p. 10). He has used empirical studies primarily of post-Soviet Union countries to show that elites were both the main drivers of democratization (Pakulski, 2012, p. 10). Once this relationship between elite desire and democratization was observed, there was a revitalized understanding of elite power in politics.

#### *Elite-driven theory as a theory of democratization*

While many elite scholars share the belief that elites can trigger democratization, they all have a slightly different approach to how this happens. This literature review will discuss the explanations that are given the most weight in the theoretical discussions of the elite-driven theory of democratization. Dogan and Higley (2012) argue that the main mechanism of change is a crisis. They argue that in times of crisis, elites are usually confronted with threats to their position in society and as such are pushed to favor regime change. Their argument can be visualized below:



However, although their work is well respected in this field, the authors tend to use the term 'crisis' quite broadly and liberally. Dogan and Higley's descriptions of 'crises' encompasses

so many different characteristics that leave the mechanism a little too weak to draw any causal conclusions. Therefore, their contributions have been criticized as being too simplistic (Dogan & Higley, 2012, p. 272).

Authors who have recognized the vagueness of the condition of ‘crisis’ have added to this theory by specifying what type of crisis may push elites to enable regime change. For example, Daron Acemoglu is one of the neo-elitist scholars who defines the term crisis more specifically. He argues that *economic* crisis is the main push for elites to lobby for democracy. Although Acemoglu is an economist, he has also theorized about regime change, democratization, and the power of elites in society. In both 2001 and 2008, Acemoglu co-wrote relevant pieces of work on this topic together with James Robinson. Acemoglu and Robinson (2001) explain this theory in a purely economic sense by arguing that the rich will lose their collective wealth during an economic crisis, therefore, they will do everything to improve economic conditions even if that means democratic concessions. This argument, which is shared by Albertus and Gay (2016), amplifies the role of economics in saying that wealth protection is the main reason for elites to push for democratization.

This characteristic of ‘crises’ has also been linked to the threat of revolution in the literature on this topic. Although recognized differently, the argument behind the threat of revolution is similar to the one made above of economic crisis. Expectedly, many of the same authors argue that the threat of revolution would lead to elites spearheading democracy as the ones mentioned above. The main justification holds that in a revolution from the bottom up, elites will lose their power and wealth, therefore, they will avoid such a revolution by making democratic concessions (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2001). There is also a host of African political scientists who profess the conceivability of the elite-driven theory through the risk of social revolution.<sup>2</sup> Amongst these is Jeffrey Herbst (1997) who has written multiple books on

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<sup>2</sup> By African political scientists, this thesis is referring to scholars who have focused on Africa in their research.

African democratization and the role elites play in democratization. Herbst (1997), using the case of South African democratization shows how the threat of violent rebellion pushes elites to make democratic concessions. At the point in South African history, Herbst researched, it was clear that the continuation of Apartheid would lead to a violent revolution. Therefore, the white elites knew that the only way to secure their position would be to concede to democracy. By becoming the leaders in the democratic conversation, they refused to start the process of democratization unless certain conditions were meant for them: conditions that secured their wealth and power in South African society (Herbst, 1997, p. 602). Therefore, by avoiding revolution, the elites were able to secure their power and set the agenda for the new regime. As Albertus and Gay (2016) further explain, because democracy benefits those who create it, if the elite class leads democratization, then they can protect their wealth and power.

Another explanation, as explained by Albertus and Gay (2016) is elite uncertainty. If elites are uncertain about whether the incumbent president will remain in power, then they will look towards regime change to maintain/strengthen their position. In this argument, there is no guarantee that a new autocracy would favour the elites who currently hold power, therefore, the democratic rule seems like the less risky option to a new and unknown autocrat. Like the first and second conditions, there is the belief that if elites play a role in shaping the democratic institutions, then they will be able to maintain their position in society (Albertus and Gay, 2016, p. 2). This has been proven to happen in the past e.g., elites having significant sway in the drafting of a new 'democratic' constitution (Albertus and Gay, 2016, p. 2).

Lastly, there are various other explanations for how the theory plays out such as that provided by Etzioni-Halévy and Moore-Higley (2006). They argue that elite consensus is a necessary condition for democratization to occur. However, as explained by Frederik Englestad, many of these other explanations are highly underdeveloped, therefore, they will not be given much weight in this thesis (Labuschagne, 2002, p. 72). Nevertheless, these various

explanations show that there is no consensus concerning how the elite theory of democratization plays out, therefore, there is still a gap in the literature that needs further investigation to be filled. That is the gap this thesis aims to contribute to.

### *The democratization conversation*

Like with all theories, however, some scholars believe that this theory simply does not hold any weight. Apart from scholars who simply argue that other theories are stronger than this one, some authors actively dispute the validity of this theory. The most vocal critics of this theory include Jack Walker (1966), Henry Kariel (1966), Peter Bachrach (1967), and Carole Pateman (1970). Such theorists argue that the elite-driven theory goes against the very essence of what democracy is supposed to stand for (Walker, 1966, p. 286). It is argued that stating a small minority of society can cause regime change, and changes the normative essence of democracy and the democratization process. It is also argued that this theory does not give voters enough credit as it sees them as non-important actors with no power in political decision-making (Best & Higley, 2010, p. 4). Additionally, as mentioned by Walker (1966), the elite-driven theory fails to provide operational definitions of its key concepts. This can be seen in the lack of consensus on the ‘how’ aspect of this theory. Hence, why this thesis has chosen to investigate this part of the theory and create a usable framework based on the key concepts of the theory.

### **Research Design:**

This thesis has two main goals. The first is to develop the elite-driven theory of democratization to create a more practical theory that can be more representative of the democratization process. The second is to understand the case of Zimbabwe and why democratization did not occur in 2008. To achieve these goals, this project asks the imperative question: “*Why did Zimbabwe fail to democratize in the opportune moment of 2008?*” (*Looking through the lens of the elite-*

*driven theory of democratization*). This thesis relies on qualitative research methods to answer this question. Namely, within-case theory building with the analysis of secondary qualitative data.

### *Theory building as a methodological choice*

The main research method this thesis relies on is theory building with the use of a case study analysis. This thesis uses a naturalist approach to theory building in that it uses a case to get a richer and more contextually bound illustration of a social phenomenon (Swanson & Holton, 1997, p. 126). More specifically, the project relies on Robert Yin's (1994), case study research methodology to build upon the theory. Yin's strategy is to use an existing theory as a template to study a social phenomenon in a given case (Swanson & Holton, 1997, p. 131). The observed data in the case is then used to add to the theory originally used. This method can be seen clearly in this thesis as the elite-driven theory was the lens used to analyze the lack of democratization in Zimbabwe in 2008. After that, the findings of Zimbabwe's case are used to add to the democratization theory. The reason for this specific choice is that theoretical frameworks provide a grounded base on which to study social phenomena, while, cases like Zimbabwe provide contextual insight into theoretical frameworks.

In addition to this, considering theories are intended to indicate what will happen in each situation/ under a given set of conditions, it seems that the elite-driven theory is too simplistic to be considered a good and well-rounded theory hence the need to build on it with insights gathered from a case (Swanson & Holton, 1997, p. 114). While the elite theory has its main concepts (elites and democratization) and the relationship between these concepts mapped out, the theory lacks clarity and specificity on how exactly the concepts are measured and how the chain of events is expected to play out. Therefore, building on the theory will address these important gaps. Using Dublin's skeleton of theory building, this thesis hopes to alleviate some

of these gaps. As explained by Dublin, for a theory to be considered a good one, it should possess the following elements (Swanson & Holton, 1997, p. 129):

1. Concepts of a theory
2. Laws of attraction i.e., with concepts
3. Boundaries of a theory
4. The system state of a theory (conditions under which we expect the theory to unfold)
5. Propositions of a theory (logical deductions about the theory operation)
6. Empirical indicators
7. Hypotheses
8. Research

As mentioned before, the elite-driven theory possesses points one and two, however, it lacks concrete literature on the other elements. Therefore, this project will shed some light on which areas of the theory need to be further developed as well as developing some of the other points however slightly.

### *Data collection and analysis*

This project is grounded in political theory, therefore, practical fieldwork was not necessary to collect the data needed for this project. Rather, it relied on the analysis of existing secondary qualitative literature on both the elite-driven theory and the case of Zimbabwe. While theory building in and of itself involves deduction, induction, and abduction, this thesis only focused on the two first aspects (Stiles, 2009, p. 9). Firstly, the deduction was used in the theoretical framework section to deduce the most important features of the theory and consider what needed to be observed in the case. This part is necessary because not all aspects of the theory can be addressed at the same time (Stiles, 2009, p. 12). Induction was then used when looking at case study observations and applying them to the theoretical expectations.

The use of secondary data to shed new light on previously established theories, as explained by Stiles, “yields a more diverse, richer perspective” (Stiles, 2009, p. 10). This kind of data is the most suitable for the project because the project demands a holistic overview of both the theory and the case of Zimbabwe. Additionally, the highly descriptive nature of the project also demanded a holistic view of the events that took place in Zimbabwe. As Stiles explains, secondary data allows for multiple aspects of the theory to be questioned whereas other methods (i.e., field research) would take a much longer time to get a holistic overview of what exactly happened in Zimbabwe (Stiles, 2009, p. 11).

The analysis that took place for the theory involved mapping out the most dominant works on this theory, synthesizing the information, and creating a concrete theoretical framework of the most important aspects of this theory. This process established three dominant conditions which scholars consider to be necessities for the elite-driven theory of democratization to play out. After this framework was established, the focus then moved to the case study. To analyze the events that took place in Zimbabwe, there was an overview and synthesis of secondary sources of Zimbabwe during 2008. Considering the period under consideration is more than a decade old, secondary research was the best way to gather information. Once the information was gathered and analyzed, each condition/cost was assessed based on its presence or absence in the case of Zimbabwe, to see if these conditions were the reason that democratization did not occur.

#### *Justifications and Limitations:*

Both the choice of the elite-driven theory over other democratization theories and the choice of Zimbabwe as a case need to be justified. The former was clearly explained in the introduction: the pattern of elite formation and dominance in African countries is the main justification for believing that the elite theory of democratization would be the most fitting

theory for Zimbabwe. Justification for the case of Zimbabwe lies in the presence of characteristics that make it the ideal case for democratization through the elite. These characteristics will be discussed further in the analysis section. However, to briefly explain why Zimbabwe: As explained by Gordan Moyo (2014), Zimbabwe has a visible ruling elite that has a dangerously large amount of power in the country (Moyo, 2014, p. 70). In addition to this, the timeframe of 2006-2008 was specifically chosen because it was a highly tumultuous period. This was a period rife with political and economic crises which made it the perfect breeding ground for regime change to occur. Investigating the case of Zimbabwe, therefore, could uncover some deficiencies in the theory and/or provide some insights on Zimbabwe as a case and how it could democratize in the future

Expectedly, there are some limitations in both the methods used and in some of the choices made. A large problem that comes with this study is that of validity. Using a specific case to draw scientific/theoretical conclusions leads to the hyper-valuing of specific case observations. As explained by Bendassolli (2013), theory-building jumps from singular case observations to theoretical assumptions which has the risk of producing invalid assumptions. However, seeing as this thesis aims to understand as opposed to predicting future situations, this method is still the most appropriate regardless of the limitations it holds (Bendassolli, 2013). Limitations on the choice of looking at Zimbabwe through the lens of the elite-driven theory of democratization mean that there could be some important aspects of Zimbabwe in 2008 that are being overlooked. Some of these characteristics might be explained through different theoretical lenses. However, because realistically only one theory can be considered at a time, the justification for the choice of this one is sensible.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

The basis of the elite-driven theory, and consequently the theoretical framework of this thesis, is that elite behavior has a causal influence on political outcomes (Lopez, 2013, p. 2). While

there are many justifications for this argument, this project maintains that elites have this influence because they have power over others through their material possessions; symbolic resources; monopolization of services (Lopez, 2013, p. 3). Having control over pivotal parts of society means that the will of elites is often realized, especially in the political arena. Therefore, this power dynamic is the main justification for why elites would be able to begin the process of democratization in a country. Although as seen in the previous sections, different scholars have different theories on what would push elites to favor democracy over the autocratic government. Understanding what would push elites to democratization would then enable the thesis to answer the main research question of why democratization through elites did not unfold in Zimbabwe.

It has become clear that the overarching reason elites would push for democratization is to protect their collective wealth and power or the “preservation of the elite system” (Grugel & Bishop, 2013, p. 9) (Dye & Zeigler, 2008, p. 158). This threat to collective wealth and power is referred to by theorists as the costs that are ‘too expensive’ for elites that would result in them turning away from an autocratic regime and towards democracy. However, within this broad explanation, several indicators could pose a threat to the position and power of the elite class. Due to scope, this thesis will focus on the three most prominent conditions that most elite classes would see as egregious threats to their collective welfare. As such, these will be considered the necessary conditions for elites to push for democratization. It should be mentioned that scholars of the elite-driven theory of democratization all see these conditions as necessary not sufficient, hence why this thesis does not suggest that simply the presence of these conditions will lead to democratization. Rather, the identification of these conditions simply provides a solid and clear framework with which to look at how events unfolded in the case of Zimbabwe.

### *Condition 1: Economic Crisis*

The first condition was selected because as Acemoglu and Robinson (2001) explain, in times of deep economic crisis, elites are aware that their collective wealth is under serious threat. This threat is enough to push elites to reform to democratization to preserve their economic resources. This is because regime change is likely to revitalize the economy, especially in instances where a country is reforming from autocracy to democracy. As Acemoglu, Naidu, Restrepo, and Robinson (2019) explain in their paper, “*Democracy Does Cause Growth*,” democracies employ broad-based investment, which is often lacking in authoritarian states. In times of economic crisis, the elite’s transnational networks are also put at risk and their power (deriving from material possessions and wealth) is put at risk. In such a situation, elites will consider any changes which would prevent their wealth and power from waning. In addition to this, many have argued that members of the elite share a common capitalist ideology, therefore, an economic threat could be the number one reason that brings elites together (Labuschagne, 2002, p. 79).

### *Condition 2: High risk of Revolution*

The second condition seems to be the one with the most consensus amongst scholars. It is the most logical condition in that it states that when there is the risk of a revolution looming, elites are likely to appease the masses and make democratic concessions to prevent a revolution from occurring. Elites have a higher probability of losing more wealth and power in a revolution led from below as opposed to one that they lead. These conditions are re-iterated by the South African example presented by Herbst (1997). In the 1980s Apartheid had become too costly for the elites and there was an incredibly high chance of a revolution unfolding (Herbst, 1997, p. 599). Elites who were part of Apartheid politics had to admit that their current system of government was no longer working therefore, to maintain their positions, they led the

democratization process (Herbst, 1997, p. 599). By deciding to democratize, the elites were consequently involved in the drafting of the new constitution and the conditions under which a democratic South African would be governed. The white elites were able to maintain many of their advantageous positions in society, politics, and business because they formed the democratic institutions put in place (Albertus & Gay, 2016, p. 2). This argument of the prevention of a revolution has been re-iterated by many scholars of this theory, making it a convincing condition necessary to push for elite-driven democratization.

### *Condition 3: Elite uncertainty*

Elites desire security in their positions, and uncertainty concerning the goals of the incumbent autocratic government would urge them to push for more secure regime change (Albertus & Gay, 2016). These uncertainties are twofold: uncertainty in the government's ability to rule in the interest of elites and uncertainty to maintain power as a government. The first type of uncertainty, as explained in the 'theorizing the puzzle' section, occurs when elites are unsure of the government's future policies and goals then they will be pushed to support a new, more transparent government. The second uncertainty is directly correlated to the second condition. If elites are uncertain about the autocratic government's ability to maintain power, then they are likely to align themselves with the party likely to gain power. This project assumes that such a party would be democratic.

### *The causal process*

In addition to all of these conditions, however, it is also necessary for elites to take action towards democratization i.e., the causal process of change. When the elite decide that democracy is in their best interest, they can lead the process of democratization in one of two ways. The first is covert and long-term. This is when elites quietly start lobbying for democratic

changes when they realize that regime change would be in their best interest. The second, is a quick and overt coup against the authoritarian government, to prop up a democratic government. This can be seen in the examples of the Central African Republic and Madagascar (1993); Peru (1980); Pakistan (2008); and even Zimbabwe (2018). In all of the examples, the elite process was to make an open claim against the autocratic government to initiate regime change. Therefore, after assessing each condition in the case of Zimbabwe, there also needs to be an assessment of whether or not elites took either of these steps towards making democratic change.

To re-iterate, elites originate from the dominant class, and they aim to perpetuate their position of power (Diamond, 1988, p. 115). If democratization is the only way left to do this, then elites will push for democratization. A concrete framework for the elite theory of democratization includes the presence of three interrelated conditions. These conditions are (an) *economic crisis*, *high risk of revolution*, and *elite uncertainty*. Therefore, these are the conditions that frame the analysis of Zimbabwe in 2008. In many cases, these conditions influence each other, hence why they are considered the ‘high costs’ of autocracy which make democratization appealing to elites. The clear mapping out of this framework provides a clear lens with which to analyze the Zimbabwean case. The framework suggests that there would have been an elite coup against the authoritarian government in 2008, however, the next section will show there was no attempt to explain this outcome.

### **Analysis:**

It is important to note that the findings of the previous section (i.e., the theoretical framework), established necessary but not sufficient conditions in which the elite-driven theory would be expected to unfold. However, no democratization theory could provide sufficient conditions for democratization to unfold due to the context specificity of regime change. From as early as

1999, it was clear that Zimbabweans were craving democratic rule. This desire initiated the formation of the *Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)*. (Mlambo, 2014, p. 232). By 2008, this desire had reached its zenith when many Zimbabweans began to realize that the autocratic government was deficient in its rule (Mlambo, 2014). It was during this period, particularly, that people believed democratization would occur.

### *Condition 1: Economic Crisis*

It is no secret that the world suffered a disastrous economic crisis in 2008. However, Zimbabwe's crisis reached new heights. Zimbabwe held the position of the highest inflation rate in the world with a staggering number of 11.2 million percent (Muvingi, 2008). While this was caused by many different factors (e.g., drought and the cholera epidemic), the Zimbabwean government's own decisions had a large role to play in the economic crisis.

The Zimbabwean government made some decisions in the early 2000s which compounded the economic hardships in the country. One of these decisions was the implementation of the *Fast-track land-reform program (FTLRP)*. The FTLRP issued by the government stripped white farmers of their farmland to give the land to the black majority in Zimbabwe. However, because the process was not coordinated well, it was a huge disaster. The farmlands were given to the autocratic government supporters and loyalists rather than to black farmers who knew how to cultivate farmland (Mlambo, 2014, p. 237). As a result, the productivity from these farms dropped drastically. Since agriculture was the backbone of the Zimbabwean economy, this 'reform' program crippled the Zimbabwean economy.

In addition to this, the FTLRP left 450,000 people unemployed, which consequently added to the shrinkage of the Zimbabwean economy (Mlambo, 2014, p. 237). Moreover, aside from the agricultural sector, other industries were crippled by the worsening economic situations. Millions more Zimbabweans lost their jobs in other sectors and the already high

unemployment rate got even higher. It peaked at a staggering 80% unemployment rate (Mlambo, 2014, p. 238). While the government was still able to maintain basic functions in 2008, due to the economic crisis, there was a rapid decline in the well-being of Zimbabweans and the functioning of state infrastructures e.g., healthcare, education, etc. (BTI, 2007, p. 7). In addition to this, food had also become a cause of concern in the country. It was estimated that 5.1 million of the country's 11.6 million people had no access to food by the end of 2008 (Tawodzera, 2014). This was not only due to the lack of food production at home, but also, the government could no longer import food because of the economic crisis.

Looking at this evidence, there is no uncertainty that Zimbabwe was facing a deep economic crisis in 2008. Therefore, even on closer investigation, condition one was present in the case of Zimbabwe. However, the elites in Zimbabwe did not see it as a threat to their wealth as would have been expected from the theoretical explanation. Ironically, some literature indicates that the elite class in Zimbabwe benefitted from the chaotic events in and around 2008 (BTI, 2007, p. 14). As mentioned above, because of the dire economic situation, goods in Zimbabwe became scarcer due to the decreased ability to locally produce and the inability to import at previous rates. The (2008) BTI even mentions that elites were given preferential import/export rates. As such, people who owned goods could charge even more for them because of the increased scarcity. As already established, owners of goods in Zimbabwe were primarily part of the elitist class. Therefore, the economic crisis in 2008 had the effect of making the rich richer and the poor poorer. Therefore, while there was a dire economic crisis in Zimbabwe in 2008, it did not threaten elite wealth as expected. Rather, it provided them with the opportunity to increase their collective wealth.

Nevertheless, while the elites could make the best out of a bad situation, this is not to say that they were not alarmed by the economic turmoil that ensued during this time. However,

this condition alone did not seem to have been a strong enough condition (in how it materialized in Zimbabwe), to persuade elites to begin the democratization conversation.

### *Condition 2: High risk of Revolution*

There is a host of empirical evidence which reveals the reality that Zimbabwe was on the brink of a social revolution in 2008. By 2008, the government had committed so many monstrosities against the Zimbabwean people that the tension in the country was palpable (Mukuhlan, 2014, pp. 170-172). Along with the economic and livelihood crisis in the country, there was also a political crisis ensuing (Muvingi, 2008, p. 77). As Muvingi (2008) explains, by 2008, Zimbabwe ranked in the category of failed states.

As mentioned above, there was a dire economic crisis in the country which directly fed into the risk of revolution in the country. Masses of people were unemployed, homeless, and/or starving, therefore, had nothing to lose. It is usually in situations like these where citizens are most likely to revolt against their governments. To add to the devastation that was already budding up, on 25 May 2008, the government undertook what they referred to as *Operation Murambatsvina*. Loosely translated from Shona, the word Murambatsvina means ‘to get rid of the dirt.’ In this operation, the government removed all those living in poverty out of the Harare city center and tore down their informal homes and businesses (i.e., buildings made of scrap materials), leaving people without livelihoods or homes. Operation Murambatsvina left 700,000 people homeless, unemployed, and starving (Mlambo, 2014, p. 235). With all of these mounting crises during this period, it became a dangerous realization that many Zimbabweans no longer had anything to lose. Therefore, revolution for better living conditions was a real and immediate fear of both the government and the elite class.

Corruption in Zimbabwe had become a clear and looming enemy to the people (Muvingi, 2008, p. 80). Political corruption and looting coupled with the economic crisis added

to the anger and desperation that the Zimbabwean people were feeling. In addition to this, there was strong opposition power in Zimbabwe which could lead to a revolution during this time. MDC had garnered up a great deal of evident support by 2008. For the first time, ZANU-PF lost the controlling majority in parliament to the opposition party in 2008 (McGreal, 2008). In the first round of the 2008 elections, the opposition party won with 50.8% of the vote share, and the legislature was effectively owned by the opposition party this year (McGreal, 2008). This alone was a clear indication that there could be a bottom-up revolution led by the opposition party and its supporters. However, the reaction to such wins by the incumbent government made the situation even riskier in Zimbabwe.

As a response to their waning support, the government responded with a host of violence and intimidation tactics (Mlambo, 2014, p. 235). What has been described as a 'reign of terror' ensued against Zimbabwean citizens who supported the opposition government or even spoke out against any grievances against the government (Muvingi, 2008, p. 82). While this violence was intended to intimidate citizens, it had the counter-effect of making citizens angrier with the existing government.

Looking at this condition in isolation, the evidence clearly shows that it was met. Zimbabwe was on the brink of undergoing a revolution because of the unacceptable state the country was in. However, with hardly any literature on the elite response to the threat of revolution, it is hard to analyze what effect this condition had on the case of Zimbabwe. It could be argued that the risk of revolution did push elites to react and make some concessions albeit not necessarily democratic concessions. These concessions were made through the signing of the Government of National Unity (GNU), which will be discussed in greater detail at the end of this section.

### *Condition 3: Elite Uncertainty*

As mentioned above, elite uncertainty includes uncertainty in the government's ability to rule (i.e., maintain conditions in the country) and uncertainty in their ability to maintain power. Looking at the previous two conditions, it could already be argued that elite uncertainty would have been implicitly present in the case of Zimbabwe. However, these two points will still be considered explicitly concerning the feelings of the elite group.

As explained by the BTI report of 2008, there was growing insecurity surrounding the capabilities of the government (BTI, 2007, p. 2). While some research suggests that the economic crisis may have been favorable to elite groups, on a broader scale, the state of the country in 2008 was not favorable to elites. Many international businesses pulled operations from Zimbabwe during this period because of the political violence, economic crisis, and corruption (Mukuhlan, 2014, p. 171). In addition to this, as a result of ZANU-PF's human rights abuses, Zimbabwe received sanctions from the European Union and the United States of America (Mukuhlan, 2014, p. 171). Ruling elites specifically were targets of personal sanctions and travel bans during this period (Badza, 2010, p. 150). All of these things posed a great threat to elite positioning which in turn, led to the feeling of uncertainty in the autocratic government's ability to cultivate conditions favorable for the elite group. Both masses and the elite had been losing faith in the capabilities of the incumbent government (BTI, 2007, p. 2).

Additionally, the elite group could also not ignore the substantial possibility that both the national and international unpopularity of the ZANU-PF government could lead to their loss of power. The MDC win of 2008 mentioned above, alarmed elites and made them uncertain about ZANU-PF's ability to maintain power. Consequently, this seriously got many elites in the country to consider aligning themselves with the democratic party to give them the ability to set the agenda in the new regime.

On the other hand, however, contrary to the belief of the population, the political opposition was not very strong in 2008. While the opposition party, was increasing in prominence in the years before 2005, its support and power began to wane during these pivotal years in question (BTI, 2007, p. 3). Due to elites' involvement in political life, it could be argued that they were well aware of the weaknesses of the opposition party. MDC had not been strong because of its lack of vision and focus. As explained by Mlambo (2014), from the beginning, MDC was made up of all types of people who all had different ideas of how Zimbabwe should be governed. The only political view that they shared was disdain for the government in power. One could argue that a political party formed on common enemy values rather than shared goals and visions is doomed from the start. Additionally, there was a split in the party in 2005. The split resulted in each faction having a smaller share of political power than they had when they were united. Therefore, while there was general uncertainty around the survival of the authoritarian regime, there was not strong enough opposition power that would convince elites to align themselves with (democratic) opposition power.

In addition to this, even though it can be shown that elites were somewhat uncertain about the state of the country, evidence suggests that they were not uncertain about their position in Zimbabwean society and their continued power. The peak of the 2008 economic crisis was largely exacerbated by the government's decision to appease elites. Post-independence, the government decided to pay out great sums of money (that they did not have) to ex-war veterans (i.e., elite groups). Along with this, the land reform program was also targeted at appeasing elites – by gifting them with farmland to maintain loyalty and patronage networks to the incumbent government (BTI, 2007, p. 15). It appears that many of the decisions the government made, although detrimental to the country as a whole, were to benefit the elite class. Benefits from such political decisions could also be seen as a reason why a majority of the elite class did not decide to look toward democratization. Therefore, while there may have

been uncertainty about the government and the state of the country, from government actions it appears that there was no uncertainty about their determination to uphold the elite agenda. Therefore, it can be argued that the uncertainty that did exist did not outweigh the security that the elite class had felt from the autocratic government in the previous years. Since the uncertainty was not directly related to elite power and wealth, the elites were not particularly motivated by this condition to look toward democratic regime change, especially with the absence of strong democratic opposition.

### *The Hail Mary that was the GNU*

Looking at all three conditions, however, it is evident that each condition was met to some extent. So, of course, there was a reaction from the elites. This reaction was the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in February of 2009 (Mukuhlan, 2014, p. 170). As explained above, the conditions of 2008 were dire and although the elites may have benefited from some of it, it was clear that they would lose their collective wealth and power if the country faced further plunder (Mukuhlan, 2014, p. 171). Hence, the formation of the GNU was an attempt to improve the socio-political conditions in the country. Ultimately, the GNU was a short-term coalition of the autocratic (ZANU-PF) and democratic (MDC) governments. It was a solution that in essence failed to create any real democratic concessions in Zimbabwe. While it succeeded in improving many short-term socio-economic issues, it did not change anything politically (Mukuhlan, 2014, p. 173). The autocratic regime remained firmly in power. Regardless, this seemed to be the action that the elites took to deal with the 2008 crisis. The GNU provided them with a platform in which they could protect their collective wealth and power without having to give away any power through democratic concessions (Mukuhlan, 2014, p. 175).

The GNU was facilitated by South African president Thabo Mbeki, who practically forced the three parties to agree on some concessions for the sake of the future of Zimbabwe (Badza, 2010, p. 149). It should be noted that the GNU was not necessarily an internally driven decision for Zimbabwe but more of a regional one by its neighbors (Badza, 2010, p. 156). Nevertheless, due to the short-term success of the GNU, the elites did not have to make any more concerted democratization efforts.

#### *What does this mean?*

After looking more closely at what was going on in Zimbabwe, there seem to be several explanations for why Zimbabwe did not democratize. The original assumption this thesis was based on though, seems to be a valid one: the conditions for the elite-driven theory to unfold were present. However, each condition was not present in the idealized way that is expected in the theoretical framework. For the first condition, there was a dire and threatening economic crisis, however, for the most part, the rich seemed to be protected from the negative aspects of the crisis. Therefore, the presence of this condition alone would never have been enough to persuade elites to start the democratization conversation. The second condition appears to be the only condition that was met to the fullest degree, with no disputing factors. With regards to the third condition, like the first, it was met but not in the way that would be needed for elite-driven democratization to occur. While there was uncertainty with the state of the country, elites were not uncertain about their security in the future of Zimbabwe which is the main type of uncertainty that would matter in this theory. Due to the formation of the GNU, it seemed that elites did not even have to get to the causal aspect of this process once each condition was met. The GNU was the elite reaction to the presence of each one of these conditions.

*Necessary conditions for elites to lead democracy as seen in the case of Zimbabwe:*

*Table 1.2*

The fact that one condition was fully met and the other two were not, clearly shows the interrelatedness of all of these conditions and how in the presence of *all three*, elite-driven democratization *might* occur. This is still a large *might* because the case of Zimbabwe also shows that the outcome largely depended on elite decision-making in this given context. The signing of the GNU, which is an unexpected twist that the theoretical framework did not make room for, meant that democratization did not have to happen even in the face of economic crisis, the risk of a revolution, and regime uncertainty. That is what makes the elite-driven theory such an unstable one: it relies on the decision-making of individual elitist groups in their given contextual settings.

### **Conclusion:**

This thesis looked at the elite-driven theory of democratization and how it could be used as a lens to investigate why democratization did not occur in Zimbabwe in 2008. After identifying the main conditions for this theory to unfold as being *an economic crisis, high risk of revolution, and elite uncertainty*, this project used the within-case method of theory building to investigate the case of Zimbabwe. The analysis found that each condition was met to some extent in the case of Zimbabwe, however, not in the expected way. The main conclusion of the findings is that democratization did not occur in Zimbabwe in 2008 because the elite-driven theory of democratization primarily depends on elite will and elite decision-making. In the case of Zimbabwe, elites were not desperate enough to lead the process of democratization. Their protection from the autocratic government coupled with the release provided from the GNU meant that the elites did not have to turn to democratization. While each condition was met, the relationship each condition had with the elite group was not as expected. The elites in Zimbabwe appeared to benefit from the unfavorable state of the country in 2008, therefore, regime change would not have been at the forefront of their agenda. Although it seemed that

Zimbabwe was the perfect case for the elite theory of democratization, the autocratic regime made sure to foster favor with the elite group so that they were not pushed to consider democratization.

### **Discussion and suggestions for further research**

In addition to understanding the case of Zimbabwe, this thesis also aimed to build on the elite-driven theory of democratization. The research undergone in this project sheds various insights on the elite-driven theory. Going back to Dublin's marker of a good theoretical framework, this project has developed some of these aspects but also illuminates which areas of the theory still need to be further developed.

The project sheds light on the boundaries of the theory, the system state of the theory, and the propositions of the theory. The constructed framework and case study analysis show that the conditions of this theory do not and should not have firm boundaries. This is because all the conditions are so closely interrelated and subject to environmental influences. Therefore, the boundaries of the theory are somewhat vague – which is representative of the real world. The framework created in this project further maps out the conditions under which the theory is expected to unfold which was missing from the literature before this study. Finally, this project adds to the logical deductions of this theory in that it shows that while the propositions of the theory are logical, they may not play out as expected in real cases. That combined with the boundary problem of the theory indicates that the theory that had been developed by previous scholars was primarily theoretical and not suited to assess real-life situations.

This project also showed that the empirical indicators, hypotheses, and empirical tests are all underdeveloped aspects of this theory. The biggest issue observed is that of the empirical indicators. There is a lack of quantifiability and measurability with this theory. While each condition was mapped out well, they are all conditions that are hard to measure because they

are all social conditions. Additionally, there are also no concrete hypotheses for each condition and how elites are expected to react to it. Consequently, there are no clear empirical tests for the presence of such conditions and the outcome of the theoretical hypotheses. This project was unable to address any of these issues, therefore, further research on this theory should begin with trying to determine concrete, measurable and quantifiable aspects of the elite-driven theory to make it a more practical theory.

While this project adds to the existing literature, there are also some downfalls with both this project and the elite-driven theory of democracy as a whole. A major downfall of the theory which is largely ignored in this project is that the elite-driven theory of democratization treats all ‘elites’ as the same. It is an oversimplification to assume that all elites in society would behave the same way or even desire the same political outcomes. Therefore, the choice to group all elites into one group may have oversimplified the Zimbabwean situation. Therefore, further research on either Zimbabwe or the elite-driven theory would have to pay close attention to elite stratification in each context. Seeing as this theory primarily relies on elite decision-making, it can be assumed that different elite stratifications might have different outcomes. Therefore, paying closer attention to such stratifications might yield richer results in future projects.

Lastly, the findings support an assumption that many scholars touch upon regarding elite behavior. At face value, the elite theory may seem like one based on rational choice whereas practically, it is not a rational nor reliable theory. As Schmitter (2017) explains, the role of political elites in regime change is uncertain and unpredictable. This has become clearer with the insight from the case of Zimbabwe. Elites will support whichever option would mean fewer losses for them, regardless of the consequences of such outcomes. This shows why there might be a lack of quantifiable measures with this theory. The reliance on elite decision-making still leaves each environmental characteristic in a conditional state.

Overall, despite the various points of improvement for this theory, it still proved to be a relevant tool to understand and explain why democratization did not occur in Zimbabwe. The conceptual findings of this project show that elite-led democratization did not occur in Zimbabwe because of characteristics that were previously overlooked. Using this theory as a framework allowed the project to uncover aspects of the Zimbabwean case that explain why democratization did not occur. Therefore, further building on this theory would be recommended as it can be used as a tool to aid the democratization of non-Western countries. This thesis achieved both of its main objectives in that it has uncovered missing aspects to understand the Zimbabwean case and it also added to the development of the elite-driven theory of democratization.

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