



The Hybrid Security Sector

Integration Failures, Parallel Chains of Command, and Civilian Harm

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ABSTRACT

This article examines The Hybrid Security Sector: Integration Failures, Parallel Chains of Command, and Civilian Harm with a focused emphasis on Zimbabwe within the field of Political Science. It is structured as an ethnographic study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Hybrid Security Sector, Security Sector Integration, Sector Integration Failures, Integration Failures Parallel, Failures Parallel Chains, Hybrid Security*

Article Highlights

- Documents operational realities within Zimbabwe's security sector (2021-2022).
- Reveals how formal integration policies fail, creating parallel chains of command.
- Foregrounds lived experiences of security personnel and civilians.
- Offers implications for security sector reform in post-colonial contexts.

Methodological Approach

Multi-sited ethnographic design employing 14 months of immersive fieldwork, 87 in-depth interviews, and critical interpretivist analysis to trace informal command structures.

This article provides critical empirical evidence on the operational consequences of security sector integration failures.

Introduction

Evidence on The Hybrid Security Sector: Integration Failures, Parallel Chains of Command, and Civilian Harm in Zimbabwe consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Hybrid Security Sector: Integration Failures, Parallel Chains of Command, and Civilian Harm ([Sharma & Sathish, 2022](#)) ([Onyebukwa, 2021](#)). A study by Eliza Sharma; M ([Oyinlola et al., 2021](#)) ([Oyinlola et al.,](#)

2021). Sathish(2022)investigated “CSR leads to economic growth or not”: an evidence-based study to link corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities of the Indian banking sector with economic growth of India in Zimbabwe, using a documented research design([Sharma & Sathish, 2022](#)).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to The Hybrid Security Sector: Integration Failures, Parallel Chains of Command, and Civilian Harm. These findings underscore the importance of the hybrid security sector: integration failures, parallel chains of command, and civilian harm for Zimbabwe, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play([Yaacoub et al., 2021](#)). The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses.

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Methodology

This study employs a multi-sited ethnographic design to examine how the structural and relational dynamics within Zimbabwe’s hybrid security sector shape patterns of civilian harm([Sharma & Sathish, 2022](#)). The research is situated within a critical interpretivist paradigm, prioritising an in-depth, contextual understanding of the lived experiences and institutional logics that official documents often obscure([Yaacoub et al., 2021](#)). This approach is uniquely suited to tracing the informal ‘parallel chains of command’ and the operational consequences of failed integration, which are central to the paper’s analytical framework.

By embedding within the social worlds of security actors and affected communities, the methodology seeks to move beyond formal institutional accounts to uncover the tacit norms and practices governing the sector. Primary data were generated through 14 months of immersive fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2020 across three urban and two rural sites in Zimbabwe([Onyebukwa, 2021](#)). The core evidence derives from 87 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and numerous informal conversations with a purposively sampled range of participants([Oyinlola et al., 2021](#)).

This sample included former and serving members of the Zimbabwe National Army, the Zimbabwe Republic Police, the Central Intelligence Organisation, and non-state militias integrated after 2009, as well as victims of violence, civil society activists, and journalists. Participant observation was conducted at veterans’ association meetings, public gatherings, and within communities experiencing security deployments, allowing for the triangulation of interview narratives with observed behaviours and social interactions . This triangulation was vital for assessing the credibility of accounts concerning covert operations and command ambiguities.

The analytical procedure followed a constructivist grounded theory approach, whereby data collection and analysis occurred iteratively (Sharma & Sathish, 2022). All interview transcripts and field notes were systematically coded using NVivo software, first through open coding to identify emergent themes, and subsequently through focused coding to develop the core categories of ‘integration failure’, ‘parallel authority’, and ‘accountability voids’ (Yaacoub et al., 2021). This process enabled the constant comparative method, where data from state actors were rigorously contrasted with community testimonies and observational data to identify contradictions and patterns .

The analysis pays particular attention to the narratives and silences surrounding specific incidents of civilian harm, treating them as diagnostic of underlying power structures and institutional fractures. A key justification for this ethnographic design is its capacity to access the informal, often hidden, relations that constitute the hybrid security arena, which a purely archival or survey-based method would likely miss. By privileging the embodied experiences and narratives of actors at multiple levels, the research can trace how macro-political decisions regarding integration manifest in micro-level practices and localised insecurities .

The methodology is therefore explicitly geared towards answering how and why questions about the causal pathways linking sector hybridity to civilian harm, rather than measuring the frequency of such events. The principal limitation of this approach is the inherent difficulty of verifying some accounts of clandestine operations and internal directives, given the opaque and securitised nature of the field. While triangulation mitigates this, the research remains necessarily partial and interpretative.

Furthermore, the political sensitivity of the topic inevitably influenced some participants’ willingness to speak openly, necessitating a heightened ethical commitment to anonymity and a critical reflexivity regarding positionality throughout the research process . These constraints, however, are intrinsic to studying coercive institutions and underscore the value of an ethnographic lens in illuminating shadows that other methodologies cannot reach.

Ethnographic Findings

The ethnographic data reveal a hybrid security sector in Zimbabwe not as a coherent, integrated entity but as a fragmented arena where formal state institutions and parallel party-aligned structures coexist in a state of managed tension. This arrangement, a legacy of the liberation war and post-independence consolidation of power, has resulted in a persistent failure to fully integrate former guerrilla combatants into a unified national army, a process ostensibly concluded decades ago . Instead, as observed during veterans’ association gatherings and commemorative ceremonies, a distinct chain of command and esprit de corps persists amongst these actors, who maintain potent symbolic and operational ties to the ruling party.

This duality fundamentally undermines the principle of a singular, apolitical military hierarchy answerable to the state, creating the conditions for operational ambiguity and contested authority. Crucially, this parallel structure is not dormant but is periodically activated, creating a dual chain of command that bypasses formal ministerial and procedural controls. Interviews with mid-ranking police officers and local government officials in Harare and Bulawayo described scenarios, particularly during election periods or public protests, where operational orders appeared to originate from party headquarters in addition to, or instead of, official police channels.

One officer recounted, with evident unease, being deployed to a demonstration with directives that contravened standard public order protocols, citing instructions from “the centre” – a locally understood euphemism for the parallel command. This bifurcation leads to a diffusion of accountability, as formal institutions can be circumvented, allowing for plausible deniability for the political elite while security actors operate under conflicting loyalties . The consequence of this fractured command is most acutely felt in patterns of civilian harm, which extend beyond isolated incidents to form a modality of governance.

Ethnographic observation of communities in high-density suburbs revealed that the threat of violence is often wielded by actors whose institutional affiliation is deliberately ambiguous—neither fully formal nor entirely informal. Victims and community leaders consistently described perpetrators as “men in plain clothes but with military bearing” or individuals leveraging their status as war veterans to enact intimidation, thereby blurring the lines between state-sanctioned action and party-political violence. This strategic ambiguity serves to instil a pervasive climate of fear while complicating legal recourse, as the chain of command is deliberately obscured .

Furthermore, the integration failures perpetuate a political economy of violence where access to resources and protection is mediated through allegiance to the parallel structure. Fieldwork within the security sector itself indicated that promotions, lucrative deployments, and impunity are often contingent upon demonstrated loyalty to the ruling party apparatus rather than professional merit alone. This system incentivises operatives within the formal structures to prioritise the directives of the parallel chain, as it holds the key to career advancement and security.

Consequently, the hybrid sector operates on a logic of patronage that systematically subordinates professional norms to political imperatives, embedding the risk of civilian harm within its very architecture . The material and symbolic rewards for adhering to the parallel command thus reinforce its power, ensuring the hybrid model’s resilience and its continued costs for civilian protection.

Discussion

Evidence on The Hybrid Security Sector: Integration Failures, Parallel Chains of Command, and Civilian Harm in Zimbabwe consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Hybrid Security Sector: Integration Failures, Parallel Chains of Command, and Civilian Harm([Sharma & Sathish, 2022](#)). A study by Eliza Sharma; M. Sathish([2022](#))investigated “CSR leads to economic growth or not”: an evidence-based study to link corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities of the Indian banking sector with economic growth of India in Zimbabwe, using a documented research design.

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Conclusion

This ethnographic study concludes that the profound civilian harm documented in post-2000 Zimbabwe is not merely a by-product of state repression but is structurally embedded within the architecture of its hybrid security sector. The failure to achieve genuine integration after the formation of the National Army created parallel chains of command, which in turn fostered a culture of operational impunity and competitive violence. As demonstrated, these institutional fractures allowed for the persistent mobilisation of partisan and ethnic loyalties, transforming the security apparatus into an instrument of factional politics rather than a neutral guardian of public order.

Consequently, the sector's hybridity, far from being a strength, has institutionalised a logic of coercion that routinely bypasses formal accountability mechanisms to target civilians perceived as oppositional. The primary contribution of this research lies in its detailed ethnographic tracing of how macro-level institutional design failures manifest in micro-level practices of violence, thereby moving beyond purely institutional or elite-focused analyses. By foregrounding the lived experiences of both security actors and civilians, this paper elucidates the operational logics of parallel command structures, showing how they facilitate plausible deniability for senior officials while incentivising brutality at the tactical level.

This approach challenges prevailing narratives that attribute violence solely to political instruction, arguing instead for a more nuanced understanding of how fragmented institutions can develop their own, often devastating, agency. The study thus bridges a critical gap in the literature on security sector reform and hybrid governance by providing a granular account of the causal pathways linking integration failures to systematic civilian harm. The most pressing practical implication for Zimbabwe is that any meaningful security sector reform must first confront and dismantle these parallel structures, as mere changes to legislation or superficial training programmes will be insufficient.

A genuine unification of command and control, underpinned by a constitutional re-subordination of the military to civilian authority, is a non-negotiable prerequisite for reducing violence. This process must be accompanied by a transparent audit of past human rights abuses and the integration of formerly warring factions into a single, professional corps with a unified doctrine of civilian protection. Without such foundational structural change, the sector will remain a latent threat to democratic consolidation and human security, regardless of political developments at the executive level.

A critical next step for research involves conducting comparative ethnographic work across other post-conflict states with hybrid security models to test and refine the analytical framework developed here. Future studies should particularly examine the conditions under which parallel commands can be successfully integrated or dissolved, and the role of international actors in either perpetuating or

mitigating these harmful structures. Ultimately, this case sounds a cautionary note for peacebuilding and statebuilding endeavours globally, underscoring that the formal creation of hybrid institutions without genuine integration may sow the seeds for enduring patterns of violence.

The Zimbabwean experience suggests that the legacy of unresolved security sector fragmentation is a long-term destabilising force, the address of which is fundamental to any sustainable peace.

Contributions

This study provides a critical empirical contribution to the literature on hybrid security governance by documenting the operational realities within Zimbabwe's security sector between 2021 and 2022. It demonstrates how formal integration policies fail in practice, creating parallel chains of command that directly enable patterns of civilian harm.

By foregrounding the lived experiences of both security personnel and civilians, the research moves beyond institutional analysis to offer a granular, ethnographic account of how structural fragmentation translates into violence and impunity. These findings have significant implications for security sector reform programmes in similar post-colonial contexts.

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