

# Zimbabwe's National Youth Service Program

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The positive attributes of National Youth Service Policies (NYSPs) are lauded by practitioners and policy makers across the globe. Yet the very nature of NYSPs as government mandated programs opens them to misuse and exploitation by governing bodies. Some observers believe that Zimbabwe's National Youth Service Program (NYSPZ) exemplifies the potential dangers of NYSPs left unchecked.

The Zimbabwean National Youth Service Program (NYSPZ) was initiated in July 2001 and focuses on instilling youth with the following five values: 1) National Identity 2) Patriotism 3) Unity and Oneness 4) Discipline and 5) Self Reliance.<sup>1</sup> Participants spend three months in training camps, after which they are required to complete a one month service project in their communities. Zimbabwe's Youth Minister, Saviour Kasukuwere, recently announced the government's plans to expand the National Youth Service Program to provide all Zimbabwean youths the opportunity to participate in the program. This announcement brought criticism of Zimbabwe's National Youth Service Program (NYSPZ) to the forefront of media attention across the continent.

Each of Zimbabwe's eight regions supports a NYSPZ training camp, with the capacity to house 1,000 volunteers for each training cycle. The training camps are designed to imitate military training camps, as reflected by participants' scheduled activities which include marching drills, morning runs and chores. The militaristic nature of the camps has led many Zimbabweans to conclude that the NYSPZ is simply a ruse for a youth militia program operated by the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), which has dominated the majority in both the legislative and executive branches of government since 1980. Reports detailing trainees' actions after 'graduating' from the program have strongly reinforced this belief. Former participants, Zimbabwean citizens and outside observers have reported that ZANU-PF's enemies were tortured and murdered by camp leaders and participants, and that some former participants harass opposition party members and enforce laws on ZANU-PF's behalf.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, most of NYSPZ's opponents belong to the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

MDC members argue that the NYSPZ is a party program, not a national one. An integral component of the NYSPZ, the National Orientation (NO) sessions, strengthens this argument. NO sessions are essentially lectures on Zimbabwe's political and cultural history. However, the sessions are structured to glorify Zimbabwe and the ruling party, and participants are taught the importance of remaining loyal to ZANU-PF to strengthen

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<sup>1</sup>See Ministry of Youth Development: <http://www.mydgec.gov.zw/nys.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> See Child Soldiers Global Report, 2004:

<file:///D:/Public/Communications/ICP%20Newsletter/2007%20Newsletters/Issue%2044,%20June%202007/articledirect.aspx.htm>; and State Department report: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41634.htm>.

and maintain Zimbabwe's independence and culture.<sup>3</sup> ZANU-PF denies that the program is party-based, but some members concede that because ZANU-PF has the majority in the government, it is natural for participants to become loyal to their party.<sup>4</sup> Yet many Zimbabweans believe that if ZANU-PF lost the majority seat in government, the NYSPZ would cease to exist.

Evidence strongly suggests that the NYSPZ is a politically focused program, with only a small component centering on community service and engagement. How political the program is and how loyal participants are to ZANU-PF is hotly contested, and there is no consensus amongst Zimbabweans on its credibility and effectiveness. However, at the very least, the reports coming out of NYSPZ can serve as an important reminder that government-run programs requiring and/or encouraging youth participation need to be monitored closely by both a party neutral government committee as well as non-governmental organizations to ensure credibility and effective practice.

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<sup>3</sup> Shumba, Rejoice; *National Identities in the National Youth Service of Zimbabwe*; University of Johannesburg, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Shumba, *National Identities*..