Chapter 3
Rule Flouting as Argumentation Strategy: A Case of the South African and Zimbabwean Parliaments

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ABSTRACT

Parliamentary discourse is rule-governed with controlled diction, specific as well as documented protocol and standing orders in place, one would expect that parliament is a place where all is serene and actors are as “honourable” as they are titled. Recent events in most African parliaments have proven that the serenity expected from parliament is anything near reality. Language use is at times foul and conduct dishonourable. The rules of the house are flouted and when such happens it is usually deemed “un-parliamentary.” Though “un-parliamentary” such language and behaviour can be seen as a form of argumentation. Argumentation, which is the primary activity that parliamentarians are involved in whenever there is a sitting has been defined as a verbal, social, and reasoned activity aimed at convincing critics of the acceptability of an argument by putting forward a number of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint. This chapter looks at the argumentation within un-parliamentary behaviour which flouts parliamentary discoursal conventions.

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INTRODUCTION

The analysis of argumentation (in diverse contexts) has a long history which has been fraught with many challenges. Starting with Aristotle (350BC), studies have sought to examine the art of speaking so as to alter the standpoints of those who may not be in agreement with us. Having such a long history, argumentation has indeed been a topical concern. One of the central ideas to evolve from studies on argumentation has been that all men use argumentation (Aristotle & Roberts, 2004). Such use may be “random” or “through practice and from acquired habit” (Aristotle & Roberts, 2004). In the case of parliamentary discourse, members come from a diversity of backgrounds in terms of education and socio-economic levels. In the Zimbabwean parliament as is also the case with South Africa there have been semi-literate members who did not make it beyond the Primary school level. Other members in the house are highly educated holding several degrees including doctorates. Given such a scenario it is evident that these members’ argumentation abilities may be worlds apart. Regardless of these differences, some of parliament’s most important decisions have been spearheaded by individuals who do not bother themselves with the intricacies of parliamentary debate conduct and may even come from semi-literate backgrounds. It is custom that members are inducted on acceptable language, discourse routine as well as other facets of parliament such as dress codes and a failure to follow the prescribed rules known as “Standing Orders” may result in expulsion from the house. Notwithstanding such orientation and induction, there are instances when members fail to follow protocol and in cases words fail them till they resort to other alternatives like song, chanting, dancing or physical confrontation as means of communication.

With decisions in the house being arrived at by means of a plebiscite, it is critical that members develop rhetorical skills which will see them convince other members to vote in favour of their stance. Aristotle (2004) argues then that “it is possible to inquire the reason why some speakers succeed” in their argumentation while others do not. African parliaments like most are characterised by schisms along political ideology and affiliations which often render debate useless as voting is often premised on political belonging rather than reason. However, success in swaying opposition has been witnessed lately with Pravin Gordhan of South Africa’s ANC encouraging members of his own party to go with the motion from the EFF to depose Jacob Zuma from the Presidium. The same scenario was also witnessed in Zimbabwe when the two main parties, ZANU PF and MDC agreed to pass a vote of no confidence in then-incumbent President, Robert Mugabe.

With parliaments seeking to be more transparent in their business such that the Hansard has ceased to be the only record of events, governments have opened up parliament’s business to the glare of television cameras and now the events in
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