

Zimbabwe's Multilayered Crisis



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Once a vibrant and dynamic society, Zimbabwe has since the turn of the millennium gone through a complex multilayered and pervasive series of catastrophes. Political instability, lawlessness, misgovernment and a relentless economic meltdown has transformed this leading southern African nation into an international pariah. While measures have been taken to improve the situation, there continues to be a constellation of factors that challenge the ability to come to terms with the current political confrontation between the regime and the opposition.

GENESIS OF THE CRISIS

The long-term origins of the crisis lie in the 90 years of colonial rule and the stark racial inequalities that prevailed under the white minority rule that continued after the 1965 declaration of independence. An armed struggle to liberate Africans from the clutches of this oppression culminated in the end of white minority rule in 1980. However, armed liberation also laid the foundations for an anti-democratic ruling party intolerant of dissenting view points.

The formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999, which challenged the hitherto unrivalled political dominance of the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front

(ZANU-PF), created a sense of panic within the ruling party. They responded with ruthless violence designed to destroy this opposition threat to the regime's longstanding post-liberation incumbency.

The deteriorating economic conditions that prevailed from the early 1990s onward contributed to the rise in popularity of the MDC. Arguably, the decline began with the World Bank/IMF-inspired Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in the early 1990s, which led to rapid de-industrialisation, growing unemployment and severe erosion of living standards. In October 1997,

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President Robert Mugabe decided to authorise unbudgeted gratuities and monthly pensions to War Veterans who demanded belated recognition of their sacrifices in the liberation of the country. To further compound the situation, in August 1998, Mugabe unilaterally decided to send Zimbabwean soldiers into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in support of Laurent Kabila's government. Both decisions resulted in large expenditures, which had not been accounted for in the government budget, thus undermining the country's fiscal capacity and economy. Economic hardships sparked an increase in dissatisfaction among the country's working population and contributed to mounting unrest.

HARDSHIPS AND OPPRESSION

A convergence of interests between workers and other civil society groups led to the formation of the MDC. The MDC's defeat of the government in the 2000 constitutional referendum precipitated the current crisis, as the government unleashed a wave of terror against supporters of the MDC as well as white commercial farmers.

The chaotic and highly controversial fast track agrarian reform and the violent campaigns undertaken by the government resulted in widespread human rights abuses. Consequently, Zimbabwe became a pariah state subjected to boycotts and targeted economic sanctions by the international community. Traditionally, agriculture was the backbone of the country's economy.

Most of the manufacturing industries depended on the agricultural sector for inputs and markets. But that sector was now reeling from the dire impacts of fast track reform, boycotts and sanctions. The destruction of the agricultural sector had numerous negative effects that rippled throughout the national economy, resulting in factory closures, declining outputs and foreign currency earnings and a massive rise in unemployment.

By 2008 the Zimbabwean economy had all the indicators of a country in severe distress. Inflation rates were estimated in percentages of hundreds of millions, while the country's currency, now denominated in quintillions, was virtually worthless. Around 80 per cent of the Zimbabwean population lived on less than \$2 a day (2005) and 90 per cent were unemployed. Once the breadbasket of the entire region, Zimbabwe now imported staple food to feed its hungry population. Citizens experienced the meltdown directly through crumbling social services and infrastructure, frequent power cuts, factory closures and a worthless national currency. Perhaps the most life threatening development followed from the intermittent domestic supply of water and the simultaneous breakdown of the country's urban water system, resulting in a horrendous cholera outbreak.

To make matters worse, the economic crisis resulted in a massive collapse of the country's

social services sector. Health and education services declined precipitously in the face of chronic and severe underfunding. Moreover, since most professionals voted with their feet by joining the growing Zimbabwean diaspora in search of better prospects abroad, social service collapse was accelerated by the debilitating effect of brain drain. In short, the country's once internationally envied health and education sectors were in tatters by 2008. Life expectancy rates plummeted 22 years in the span of 15 years - from 63 years in 1990 to 40.9 years in 2005. Child mortality rates also increased dramatically.

As if the above challenges were not enough, Zimbabwean citizens were also faced with a deepening governance and human rights crisis. Opposition supporters were subjected to endless intimidation and violence by government agents. The state's penchant for violence against opposition had already been demonstrated in the Gukurahundi massacres in the southwestern provinces of the country in the early 1980s, when an estimated 20 000 people were killed by government forces in the so-called anti-dissident campaign. Widespread and indiscriminate harassment and battering of political opponents that had previously been confined to Matabeleland, spread to the rest of the country after 2000. The erosion of individual rights was accompanied by the total disregard for the rule of law, a systematic militarisation of the state, the subversion of the judiciary and the deterioration of the country's courts. The hallmark of the country's governance crisis is seen in the callous destruction of urban shelters during the controversial Operation Murambatsvina that left hundreds of thousands of people homeless and ruined their sources of livelihood.

REGIONAL POLITICAL CHALLENGES.

The Zimbabwe crisis presents the region with the challenge of dealing with the political fallout of the region's first election loss of a liberation movement and the movement's unwillingness to cede power to the victorious opposition. This challenge demonstrates the constraints of Western pressures in the face of its duplicity around questions of democracy. The unwillingness of Mugabe to cede power also demonstrates the limits in the capacity of regional pressure to deal with states that confront universalist human rights claims and global economic inequalities by deploying anti-colonialist discourses. This is most evident in the sympathies of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) toward some of Mugabe's anti-colonial rhetoric that prevents the regional body from taking a stronger stand against the regime's widespread human rights abuses and reluctance to cede power.

SADC indicated an interest in dealing with Zimbabwe's political standoff when mandating South Africa to broker an agreement between

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ZANU-PF and the two MDC factions. From the start of the mediation process it was clear that President Mbeki's efforts were concentrated on reaching an agreement that would result in a generally acceptable election process in 2008. For Mbeki, the acceptability of the election was a key ingredient to settling the issue of international legitimacy and beginning the process of normalising the Zimbabwe crisis.

By the end of 2007 the South African mediation resulted in a minimum agreement on creating conditions for a free and fair election. The election took place on 29 March 2008 amid relatively peaceful conditions. To the surprise of many, especially ZANU-PF, the two MDC formations won most of the parliamentary seats, with Morgan Tsvangirai's faction (MDC-T) winning more seats than the rival MDC-M faction led by Arthur Mutambara. Furthermore, Tsvangirai won the first round of the presidential vote but without the 51 per cent majority needed for an outright victory.

Despite the peaceful atmosphere of the March elections, developments before and after the polls betrayed the minimum agreement reached under South Africa's mediation. For starters, the March election date was unilaterally set by Robert Mugabe, despite the MDC's concerns that more reforms were required before an election could take place. Moreover, there was much contestation over the results, particularly since it took ZANU-PF nearly a month to announce them. Based on the election results it was clear that ZANU-PF was on the ropes. A rerun of the presidential election under free and fair conditions would most likely see the demise of Mugabe's tenure. Consequently, the regime inflicted the worst electoral violence on the population since the Matabeleland massacres of the mid 1980's, resulting in Tsvangirai pulling out of the presidential rerun and a rejection of the outcome by major international bodies, including the usually compliant SADC and African Union (AU).

A GLOBAL POLITICAL AGREEMENT AND A COALITION GOVERNMENT

In the aftermath of this election debacle and the continued lack of a legitimate government in Zimbabwe, Mbeki's mediation came under increasing criticism. However, the disastrous economic and humanitarian conditions in the country, the continued pressure from SADC and the rest of the international community, an emboldened array of MDC supporters including social forces and civic groups and a weakened ZANU-PF provided the combined conditions for an agreement. It should, however, be taken into account that MDC is itself divided between two factions each with ambiguous political positions. After several months of further negotiations between the Zimbabwean parties, Mbeki managed to secure a Global Political Agreement (GPA) in September 2008 that might be described as an unhappy compromise between the major political parties. The major parts of the agreement included a land audit, a commitment to economic stabilisation and



growth, and a call for the removal of sanctions. The agreement also called for the promotion of national healing, constitutional reform, and a fostering of democratic spaces through the introduction of various commissions on elections, media and human rights.

At the same time, the GPA is challenged by concerns over the next election and a ruling party that has refused to give up state power after an electoral loss. Indeed, ZANU-PF continues to control the central levers of the military and security sectors and controls the ministries responsible for these forces. The party has thus far declared an unwillingness to consider any reform that might weaken this control. This is paralleled by a lack of any substantive budgetary support to the Inclusive Government and to those social delivery ministries (e.g. health, education) occupied by the MDC. Budgetary conflicts have further divided the transitional government with ZANU-PF claiming that the MDC was already receiving favourable treatment from the donors.

Mugabe's position is also buttressed by his continued attempts to frame his political actions as anti-colonialist struggles and SADC solidarity around this trope. From this position, Mugabe has succeeded in moving the centre of the debate to the West's unwillingness to accept an African agreement. Mugabe's framing is especially salient in the face of the West's demands for democracy and respect for human rights as a contradiction to the realities of global political and economic inequality. In addition it is easy

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for Mugabe to play on Britain's colonial legacy and the often 'clumsy positioning' of the British government in the crises.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Notwithstanding these problems, the GPA has also seen some progress in the politics of the country. Progress can be seen with a certain degree of stabilisation in the economy and the drastic disappearance of hyper-inflation. Some progress is also evident on the political front, with the appointment of the Electoral, Human Rights and Media Commissions and the introduction of a Reserve Bank reform Bill that will remove the capacity of the Reserve Bank Governor to carry out the kind of quasi fiscal activities that helped to sustain ZANU-PF. Moreover, the Mugabe regime has been forced to become more accountable to parliament and in cabinet decision-making, while the Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee (JOMIC), which was set up to monitor the implementation of the GPA, has provided an important forum for continued negotiations between the parties. The overall effect of these efforts has been a reduction, though not complete removal, of political violence in the country.

These small steps of progress could however, very quickly evaporate if there is a hasty move to hold new elections before a fuller implementation of the GPA. The assumption that a quick election will resolve the Zimbabwe crisis is one of the most dangerous propositions currently argued for by some of the players in Zimbabwe. As demonstrated in the 2008 election, the challenge today is not found in an inability of the opposition to win elections, but the inability to translate an opposition election victory into state power. The ZANU-PF regime remains unwilling to release the levers of state power. Therefore, at this stage in Zimbabwe's history it may be more advisable to extend the period of power sharing in order to prevent a disastrous return to the situation in 2008.

As the situation in Kenya has shown, there are definite risks associated with an extended period of power sharing, including:

- The entrenchment of the more repressive forces in the state
- Conflicts between the partners in government as a result of dual structures in the state – one falling under the President, the other under the Prime

Minister.

- The loss of confidence in state institutions and a growing cynicism over the experience of an inclusive government
- The convergence of interests between parties over the accumulation of resources
- Long delays in the implementation of a constitutional review process
- Divisions in civil society over the GPA
- The opposition's inability to provide an alternative political strategy for state power

The Zimbabwean crisis illustrates the complexity of attempting to defeat a party of liberation through elections in a region in which the legacies of anti-colonial struggles still have a great deal of resonance. Within this resonance, the demands for human rights and political democratisation can be constructed as an extension of a Western regime change agenda. The crisis also reveals the limitations of SADC as a regional organisation for dealing with ruling parties that refuse to adhere to its formal democratic principles by resting their tenure on a liberation struggle and coercion. With these limitations the Zimbabwean opposition is forced to fight for space within the GPA in hopes of creating the conditions for an election that would allow for the possibility of a power transfer.

At the same time, an election that does not deal with the tendency for the regime to use the military-security complex as a means for resisting power transfers is not likely to move Zimbabwe beyond the dilemmas that gave rise to the GPA in the first place. To move beyond those dilemmas, the West, and the EU in particular, must develop the language and policies of engagement that continue to encourage the implementation of the GPA. While a role for selective sanctions and targeted measures may still be required, the policy drift must move toward increasing engagement around development assistance. The future of the democratic forces in Zimbabwe depends, in important ways, on its capacity to lead an economic recovery programme that will strengthen the country's social base. The assumption that a deepening crisis and continued sanctions will be advantageous to the opposition is a dangerous fallacy.