

# Zimbabwe: Benchmarks to Recovery

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For years analysts have been predicting that Zimbabwe had reached rock bottom and that a turn-around was imminent. For years they have been wrong, and Robert Mugabe and his Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party have maintained political control while simultaneously destroying Zimbabwe’s once thriving economy. The question now is whether the post-election violence and hyper-inflation of 2008 finally marked the turning point for Zimbabwe, and if the new unity government can begin to bring Zimbabwe out of its decade-long collapse.

When Zimbabwe achieved majority rule and independence in 1980 it was one of the bright hopes of Africa. Its currency was as strong as the British pound, Robert Mugabe appeared to be an educated and enlightened leader, and all sides committed to moving past troubled colonial race relations. At first the optimism appeared justified. Zimbabwe’s economy boomed, money was poured into education, health care and infrastructure and the bitter history of racism didn’t tear the society apart. By the early 1990s, Zimbabwe had one of the highest literacy rates in Africa (and one as high as the United States), a solid economy based on agriculture, mining and production and was a true regional leader.

Unfortunately this was the high point for Zimbabwe. As the 1990s progressed Mugabe’s dictatorial tendencies came to the fore and he began to ruthlessly suppress political opposition. In order to meet increasing demands from his base Mugabe began his chaotic, and ill-fated, land redistribution program. The violent take-over of many white-owned farms, which continues today, crippled the economy and sparked increasing unemployment and inflation. In 2000, a newly-formed opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), successfully led a campaign to defeat a new constitution backed by Mugabe and ZANU-PF. ZANU-PF subsequently rigged elections in 2002, 2005 and 2008 in order to maintain their grip on power.

The most recent elections, in March 2008, saw the MDC win a majority in Parliament and MDC leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, win more votes than Mugabe. ZANU-PF responded by claiming a Presidential run-off was required because no candidate won 50 percent plus one of the votes, and then began a brutal campaign of violence to force the MDC to submit. Following a run-off, in which the MDC did not participate, and months of wrangling and international pressure, the two sides signed an agreement on September 15, 2008, to form a unity government with Tsvangirai as Prime Minister. That government was finally sworn in on February 11, 2009.

The new government is faced with enormous challenges. Zimbabwe is in the midst of a cholera epidemic that has already killed over 4,000, in part because the health care system has completely collapsed. After years of hyper-inflation Zimbabwe's currency is discredited and only foreign currency is being used. Agricultural and industrial production has collapsed completely and 90 percent of the population is unemployed. Well over half the population relies on humanitarian assistance to survive. The litany of troubles extends to a collapsed education system, continued political violence and human rights abuses and more. Perhaps most telling, the average life expectancy in Zimbabwe has fallen from 60 years in 1990 to 37 today, the world's lowest.

Against this backdrop we can ask whether Zimbabwe has finally reached its nadir and is primed to recover. One good way to assess where Zimbabwe is right now and where it needs to be is through the five benchmarks the donor community laid out for reengagement with the Government of Zimbabwe on development issues. The five benchmarks are: restoration of the rule of law; demonstrated commitment to democracy and human rights; full and equal access to humanitarian assistance; undertaking macroeconomic stabilization in accordance with guidance from the International Financial Institutions (IFIs); and a commitment to timely and internationally supervised elections. Each of these steps is important individually, but taken together they paint a good picture of how Zimbabwe can move forward to reestablish itself economically, and as a leader in southern Africa.

#### Restoration of the Rule of Law

Perhaps the first thing the Government of Zimbabwe needs to do is restore the rule of law. For too long Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party have used the legal system for their personal benefit. They have perverted justice to enrich themselves, to silence opposition and to maintain their political power. The judicial system is filled with politically appointed judges who follow the dictates of Mugabe and the party. Ironically, Mugabe has always wanted to maintain the façade of justice and usually uses the legal process to "legitimize" his actions. Of course no legitimacy is conferred because the process is completely corrupted.

A corrupted legal process has been an important part of the farm seizures that played a key role in destroying Zimbabwe's economy. Farmers have been harassed with legal actions, are unable to appeal decisions and even have decisions in their favor ignored. Demonstrating their real regard for the rule of law, the Mugabe regime has loudly stated that it will ignore the binding decision of a Southern African Development Community (SADC) tribunal to which it is party that farm seizures must stop. In every case, the resulting decisions enrich ZANU-PF insiders.

Abuse of the legal system has also played a key role in silencing opposition and maintaining ZANU-PF's power. For example, in the past few months dozens of MDC activists and civil society figures have been abducted and then handed over to the legal system after being tortured. MDC leaders and other activists are routinely arrested and

brought before the court on spurious charges. Even such senior figures as Morgan Tsvangirai and Tendai Biti have been arrested and charged with treason in recent years.

The government lets the cases wend their way through the legal system, appealing every adverse decision and attempting to appear as if the rule of law existed. The process is a sham and the regime routinely ignores orders by judges and magistrates to approve bail or order abductees released. The arrest of a magistrate who ordered Deputy Minister of Agriculture-designate Roy Bennett released in accordance with a High Court order demonstrates how little the rule of law is actually respected, despite the rhetoric.

Restoring the rule of law is critical to any recovery in Zimbabwe for two main reasons. First, no economic recovery can happen if businesses cannot rely on a level playing field and respect for contracts and other legal instruments. Zimbabwe will need foreign direct investment to recover and, while the knowledge and resources exist to entice foreign investment, no reputable company will invest significant money without a sound legal system.

Equally important no change, and hence no recovery, will happen as long as the opposition is routinely harassed, assaulted and imprisoned. The international community has been quite clear that no aid will be forthcoming as long as abductees remain imprisoned, and rightly so.

While this is one of the most important benchmarks, it is also one of the easiest on which a new government can demonstrate action. Simple steps such as releasing all political prisoners, dropping spurious charges against opposition figures and respecting SADC and other legal rulings would quickly demonstrate progress on this front.

#### Respect for Democracy and Human Rights

Related to a restoration of the rule of law is demonstrating respect for democracy and human rights. An attempt to restore democracy is at the core of events over the past year in Zimbabwe. Zimbabweans voiced their desire for change in the March 2008 elections. That democratically delivered call for change was not just ignored by the Mugabe regime, but was violently suppressed in the following months. The run-off elections of June 2008 were neither free nor fair, and occurred after a brutal campaign of violence that killed hundreds of opposition supporters. The 2008 elections were just the most recent example of the Mugabe regime's disregard for democracy.

In suppressing democracy, the Mugabe regime has also routinely violated major human rights laws and treaties. Beatings and torture became routine parts of their campaign to subdue the opposition. Cases such as Jestina Mukoko's abduction and torture became international causes, but thousands of people have been beaten or killed since March 2008 alone. The violence of the past year just adds to the regime's list of crimes that date back to Operations Gukuruhundi and Murambatsvina. In the former, up to 20,000 Ndebele were killed by military squads in an effort to suppress opposition to Mugabe in

the early and mid-1980s, while the latter destroyed the homes and livelihoods of thousands in 2005.

While the violence gets headlines, the Mugabe regime has also denied their citizens other basic rights such as the right to free speech and the right to assembly. The Mugabe regime ruthlessly suppresses free speech through the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) among other measures. The government run media serve as propagandists and routinely incite hatred of opposition figures. The only independent daily newspaper was driven out of business in 2002, in part by the bombing of their printing presses. In just one of dozens of examples of media harassment, Davison Maruziva, the editor of the independent weekly, the Standard, was arrested in 2008 for publishing an op-ed piece critical of Mugabe. The international press is not allowed to operate in Zimbabwe, and several international journalists have been arrested for “practicing journalism without a license” in the past year.

Alongside AIPPA, the Mugabe regime uses the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) to ban demonstrations and rallies opposed to the regime. When the MDC or civil-society groups, such as Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) or the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), try to hold events, they are broken up, often with force, and leaders are arrested.

Like restoration of the rule of law, respect for democracy and human rights is fundamental to any turn-around in Zimbabwe. People need to live without fear of government sponsored violence. The opposition and civil society need to be able to advocate for change freely. Respecting human rights also will be important in attracting back some of those who have fled the country. For example, many teachers will want to know that they will not be targeted for violence as they were following the March 2008 elections. Without guarantees of safety, many won't return no matter the pay being offered.

Once again, there are many simple steps a new government could take to demonstrate progress on democracy and human rights. AIPPA and other restrictive media laws could be repealed. International journalists could be allowed to enter the country freely. Marches and demonstrations could be authorized. None of these steps is difficult, but all are necessary first steps. Over the longer term the Zimbabwean justice system needs to find a way to ensure accountability for those responsible for the brutal assaults and murders of the past year.

#### Full and Equal Access to Humanitarian Assistance

The donors' third benchmark is allowing full and equal access to humanitarian assistance. The Mugabe regime has been notorious for trying to use food aid as a political tool. There have been many reports of aid only being given to those carrying ZANU-PF cards or of recipients being asked to chant ZANU slogans or attend rallies. Aid agencies and donors have worked very hard to prevent the abuse and misuse of aid, but have been unable to stop all abuse. In one case, the Mugabe regime diverted US\$ 7 million in Global

Fund money intended for life-saving HIV/AIDS treatment for its own purposes. The money was only restored when future Global Fund donations were threatened.

Humanitarian aid is a lifeline for a majority of Zimbabweans, and as such, any new government needs to guarantee it won't be misused. The United Nations estimates that up to seven million Zimbabweans, out of an estimated population of around nine million, will need food aid this season. The United States, the largest food donor, spent over US\$ 260 million on humanitarian assistance last year, and estimates for the latest crop season predict record low production again. In even the best scenarios, food aid will remain vital to Zimbabweans.

Equally important is the life-saving medical assistance provided by international donors. Due to gross mismanagement and corruption, Zimbabwe's once vaunted health care system has completely collapsed. In October 2008, public hospitals across the country shut their doors because staff was unpaid, basic supplies nonexistent and sanitation impossible. This left most Zimbabweans with no access to health care just as a cholera epidemic was beginning. International aid has saved thousands of lives in recent months and the health care system will require a significant influx of donor aid to even begin to restore itself.

Clearly, no donor is going to pour large amounts of development aid into Zimbabwe if the distribution of that aid is not equal and apolitical. Equally clear, humanitarian aid is required to keep millions of Zimbabweans alive and even larger amounts of development aid will be required to kick start economic recovery, the rebirth of the education and health care sectors and the rebuilding of key public infrastructure. The new Government of National Unity is already asking for donors to increase aid. In order to access any new aid, the government needs to ensure and demonstrate that aid will not be misused.

### Macroeconomic Stabilization

Zimbabwe's economy has imploded over the past five years. By any measurement the Zimbabwean economy has fallen off a precipice. GDP has shrunk each year, inflation is practically immeasurable, with estimates putting it in the trillions of percent, and unemployment is estimated at 90 percent. Economic and agricultural production sink to new lows every year. Once the breadbasket of southern Africa and a regional powerhouse, Zimbabwe cannot feed itself, and the economy is not even a shadow of itself.

The economic collapse is an entirely man-made crisis. Gross mismanagement and criminal corruption by the Mugabe regime crippled one of Africa's economic success stories. Starting with poorly planned land reform, moving through uncontrolled printing of money and rampant siphoning of funds from the Reserve Bank, the Mugabe regime systematically destroyed Zimbabwe's economy. Mugabe and his cronies plundered the economy to enrich themselves and maintain power. Zimbabwe is a case where politics led economics. Beginning to restore Zimbabwe's economy is as much about political will as it is about economics.

The new government needs to demonstrate fiscal responsibility and start taking steps to end the rampant corruption and mismanagement that has crippled the economy. Right now Zimbabwe owes US\$ 1.4 billion to various IFIs. Donors are not going to approve deals to bring the IFIs back to Zimbabwe without major economic policy changes.

Under the new unity government, economic recovery has been an early bright spot. Finance Minister Biti has taken steps to curb corruption, stop printing currency, end off-budget expenditures and perhaps most importantly, follow advice from the IFIs. Despite the most fervent wishes of Gideon Gono, the Governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, the rules of economics do apply to Zimbabwe and the unity government is starting to respect them.

### Commitment to Elections

Finally, as a capstone to all of the other benchmarks, donors have asked to see a commitment to timely and internationally supervised elections. This is particularly appropriate given that the latest phase of the current crisis began when Mugabe and ZANU-PF tried to steal the March 2008 elections. This was not the only, but only the most recent, effort to use violence, intimidation and vote-rigging to steal an election.

The Global Political Agreement of September 15, which created the current unity government, called for it to be a transitional government. Since the creation of the unity government, both parties have expressed a desire for new elections within two years. The challenge in meeting this benchmark will be meeting the condition that they be free and internationally supervised. Undoubtedly, many in ZANU-PF see another round of elections as a chance to “do it right” when it comes to using intimidation and violence to secure the desired outcome. However, if truly done right—in an open and free environment with international observers monitoring polling stations and tabulation—new elections could cement the beginning of Zimbabwe’s recovery.

New elections will give the people of Zimbabwe a chance to, once again, express their desire for change, and under international supervision, hopefully get the change they request. Perhaps more important, paving the way for new elections will require meeting all of the other benchmarks. In order to create conditions under which free and fair elections can take place, the legal system will have to be reformed, freedom of the press and speech will have to be restored, political violence will have to end, the use of humanitarian assistance as a political tool will have to stop and any party hoping to win the election will have to demonstrate a realistic plan for restoring the economy.

Sitting in Harare today, free and fair, supervised elections seem a long way away. However, the benchmarks set forth by the donor community provide a good roadmap of how to get there. The real question is whether there is sufficient political will to make this happen. I have seen limited signs that Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF have committed to the fundamental changes necessary to meet the benchmarks. Morgan Tsvangirai and the MDC are obviously committed to working as hard as possible to bring about the

improvements their constituents expect, but if their putative partner refuses to cooperate success will be difficult.

The United States and other donors have an important role to play in ensuring these benchmarks are met. SADC will have an equally, if not more, important role. As the guarantors of the Global Political Agreement, and the countries with the most influence, they need to be at the forefront of this process. If a new government can start taking the steps outlined above, international assistance will come, and hopefully, in time, Zimbabwe can restore its status as one of Africa's beacons of hope.