

# Politics & Diplomacy

## Zimbabwe on the Brink

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Zimbabwe, once the richest country in sub-Saharan Africa, is now mired in its deepest economic and political crisis since independence. Famine, unemployment, political violence, and skyrocketing inflation have become all too common aspects of daily life. President Robert Mugabe blames the crisis on a Western plot to unseat him, while opposition leaders blame the government's policies for creating a "crisis of legitimacy." Because of this deep divide, a wholly internal solution is unlikely. Only regional or international diplomacy and enhanced pressure can bring about a solution that both parties will accept. As the region's leader, South Africa could spearhead the international effort to pressure both parties to adopt a mutually acceptable solution. By aiding the resolution of this conflict, South Africa would not only alleviate Zimbabwe's problems, but would also secure political and economic gains for itself and the region.

Mugabe remains tactically allied with South African President Thabo Mbeki and other liberation leaders in Africa. These leaders wield great influence in the continent's international organizations, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU). In contrast, Zimbabwe's opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), has won support from labor interests and freely-elected former opposition parties in Africa, as well as Western governments, such as the United

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States and the United Kingdom. The Commonwealth—an international organization composed mainly of the UK and its former colonies, including Zimbabwe—has sent mixed messages regarding the conflict. Despite these differing positions, a combination of these international actors must converge to stabilize Zimbabwe.

**Background of the Crisis.** President Mugabe has dominated Zimbabwean politics since the country's independence in 1980. He has carefully maneuvered his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), into control of all levels of the government and the economy, using violence when necessary. His domination over national politics ended abruptly in 2000 when the MDC campaigned against a new constitution to expand the powers of the president. That referendum was defeated in February 2000 and represented the first loss Mugabe ever suffered.

In July 2000, the MDC ran a candidate in every constituency in the country and emerged with nearly 50 percent of the 120 elected positions in parliament. The president usually appoints an additional thirty members of parliament, typically party loyalists. Violence and intimidation marked the election, and most reported incidents involved state agents or ZANU-PF members attacking MDC supporters. The MDC challenged the election of nearly forty ZANU-PF members of parliament. Despite the steady dismantling of a once-independent judiciary, they won several cases, with elections annulled on the basis of illegal and violent campaign activities.

More violence characterized the 2002 presidential campaign that pitted Mugabe against MDC President Morgan

Tsvangirai. In addition, Parliament pushed through several bills that disenfranchised many voters: one tactic was to restrict polling stations in opposition strongholds, while another was to restrict the rights of Zimbabweans to speak, publish, and assemble. Mugabe won the election, although the international community condemned it as neither free nor fair.

ZANU-PF wants the MDC to withdraw its challenge to the presidential election, as it could make Mugabe's victory illegitimate, and it wants the ability to appoint a successor who would serve the remainder of Mugabe's term until 2008. This proposal would require a constitutional amendment and MDC support, since the current constitution mandates that a new election be held within sixty days of Mugabe's resignation. The MDC, on the other hand, demands that the president retire and that an internationally-supervised election be held soon after, in accordance with the constitution.

Meanwhile, the economy continues to collapse: unemployment estimates range from 70 to 80 percent; annual inflation hit 526 percent in November 2003 and is expected to reach 700 percent by year's end; rising prices have caused a severe currency shortage; and foreign investment has nearly dried up.<sup>1</sup> The government is asking the public to use traveler's checks until new banknotes can be printed, which is a problem in itself since a shortage of foreign currency leads to delays in obtaining materials to print those bank-notes. As it is, the country's second highest denomination, ZWD 500, costs more to print than it is worth. In addition to the monetary crisis, Mugabe has mismanaged the land reform program, which—combined with a

regional drought—has led to food shortages. Because Mugabe believes that the current economic and political crisis is the result of unequal land distribution, farms are often taken from white farmers without compensation and given to friends of the regime with no knowledge of farming. As a result, the land either produces a poor yield or remains fallow.

Once the MDC and ZANU-PF reach an agreement and the rule of law is restored, foreign investment and international aid will likely resume. However, the two major parties cannot solve their differences without outside facilitation and significant pressure. International diplomacy has been somewhat effective in the past, and it can be effective in the future—one of three major actors must play a key role in ending the crisis.

**The Commonwealth.** Zimbabwe's relationship with the Commonwealth is in chaos after Mugabe chose to withdraw from the body in December in the face of extended sanctions. Commonwealth member states had reached a compromise that would have allowed the suspension to

Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, and South African President Thabo Mbeki—has met periodically over the last few years to determine Zimbabwe's status within the Commonwealth. The group suspended Zimbabwe's membership after the 2002 presidential election because of widespread allegations of electoral irregularities that were corroborated by international governmental and non-governmental bodies.<sup>2</sup> Pressure for suspension had been building ever since the violence perpetrated by state agents disrupted the 2000 parliamentary elections.

Within the troika, Prime Minister Howard has consistently pushed for stronger measures against Harare, mostly because of human rights and political legitimacy concerns. Obasanjo and Mbeki, on the other hand, were willing to give Harare the benefit of the doubt and pursue soft diplomacy short of suspension, resulting in an awkward African-Western split in the troika.

In early February 2003, Mbeki and Obasanjo met in South Africa to discuss Zimbabwe. Following that meeting, Obasanjo said, "We must help Zimbabwe

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be lifted at any time provided Zimbabwe met certain criteria relating to human rights, the rule of law, and talks with the MDC. While this was an abrupt act, tension had been building for some time.

The Commonwealth troika—Australian Prime Minister John Howard,

out of its predicament and problem. We cannot do that if we become unduly and unnecessarily critical and antagonistic to Zimbabwe. We must remain constructively engaged with Zimbabwe."<sup>3</sup> To head off criticism of their softer stance, the presidents announced that Mugabe had

given assurances that he would amend press and public order laws, which have inhibited free expression and assembly, and that Harare would begin inter-party negotiations when the MDC dropped its election challenge.

Obasanjo then flew to Harare, where he met Mugabe and Tsvangirai. He later wrote Prime Minister Howard to communicate that he and Mbeki were both satisfied with Zimbabwe's progress. According to Obasanjo's letter, Zimbabwe had largely restored the rule of law, ended land seizures, nearly completed the land redistribution program, and eased press

economy was still declining.

Other African members of the Commonwealth concurred that Zimbabwe had not fulfilled its commitments. These members, including Ghana and Kenya—whose ruling parties are labor-based and came to power as freely-elected opposition parties—are leading the movement to confront authoritarianism in Africa. Their roots in respective labor movements make them more inclined to support democracy, fair elections, and the rule of law. In February, Kenyan Foreign Minister Kalonzo Musyoka also rejected the Mbeki-Obasanjo plan to let the sus

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restrictions. He and Mbeki said they saw no need for the troika to meet and discuss renewing Zimbabwe's year-long suspension from the Commonwealth. In their view, canceling the meeting would mean lifting the suspension altogether.

Howard opposed this and argued that the suspension should remain in place until the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Abuja, Nigeria in early December. Meanwhile, Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon consulted with leaders from member states and proclaimed that most thought Zimbabwe should remain suspended until the Abuja meeting.<sup>4</sup> No evidence supported Mbeki and Obasanjo's claim that Zimbabwe had made significant strides in basic freedoms and enforcing the rule of law; farm invasions and state-sponsored violence continued, foreign journalists were being expelled, and the

pension expire. He argued for legitimate elections and suggested that no decision on the suspension be made until the December Commonwealth meeting. "The continent must seriously listen to the wishes of its people. What we have gone through in Kenya is like a velvet revolution. Kenyans discovered they can change a whole government without the necessity to fire a bullet. The way forward for the whole continent, if we are to avoid conflict, is to listen to our people and give them what they want."<sup>5</sup> In addition, Botswana and Senegal also expressed reservations about supporting Harare.

Nigeria recently joined the ranks of African countries who have decided to refuse to reward Zimbabwe through the Commonwealth. As a member of the troika and host of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Nigeria refused to certify that Zimbabwe had

made progress on human rights and the rule of law, leading to the Mugabe government being denied an invitation to attend the meeting. This was an especially embarrassing diplomatic loss for Mugabe, as Obasanjo had visited Harare in the weeks before the meeting and Mugabe publicly declared that he expected to be invited. With this action, Zimbabwe lost what it considered a stalwart supporter in the Commonwealth.

### **The EU and the United States.**

The EU and the United States have also pressured Zimbabwe, at times aggressively and often disjointedly. The EU imposed targeted travel and financial sanctions against senior government and ZANU-PF officials in response to the irregularities surrounding the 2002 presidential election. In February, however, France defied the travel ban when it invited President Mugabe to the Franco-African summit in Paris. In April, Portugal defied the ban when it invited him to a summit of leaders from European, African, Caribbean, and Pacific nations in Lisbon.

Many European nations opposed the invitations, but did not publicly denounce them for fear of hindering expansion of the sanctions. In February, the EU reached a compromise when it voted to extend sanctions but also to allow President Mugabe to attend the Paris meeting. The Lisbon meeting, however, was postponed indefinitely when African leaders threatened to boycott if Mugabe was not invited, thus avoiding a showdown over the decision.

Washington enacted similar sanctions on the Zimbabwean government after the March 2002 elections, but its follow-through has been uneven. Following the election, senior ZANU-PF officials were

banned from traveling to the United States. Despite support for tougher measures in Congress and the State Department, the Bush administration delayed asset freezes until 7 March 2003. Washington has long advocated tougher measures like smart sanctions, but action has sometimes fallen short of expectations.

Shortly before U.S. President George W. Bush's trip to South Africa in July, Secretary of State Colin Powell proclaimed that Mugabe's "time has come and gone."<sup>6</sup> He advocated new leadership that would promote human rights and the rule of law. Bush was expected to push Mbeki for tougher action on Zimbabwe and offer U.S. assistance to ease a transition. During a public appearance with Mbeki, however, Bush appeared to counter Powell's position and publicly endorsed South Africa's "quiet diplomacy" approach. Some reports suggested that Bush backed down after being told that Mbeki had secured a guarantee from Mugabe that he would step down at the end of the year. Although the United States remained steadfast in its advocacy of human rights and a return to the rule of law in Zimbabwe, it seemed unwilling to push hard for enacting such a plan.<sup>7</sup>

**South Africa.** Due to its strategic importance, South Africa is the only actor that can coordinate an international effort to negotiate a solution to Zimbabwe's crisis. President Mbeki not only leads sub-Saharan Africa's richest nation, but he has also emerged as a continental power broker, holding great sway over the workings of the AU and SADC. In addition, Mbeki is the architect of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), which seeks to revolutionize Africa's economic and development relationship with the out-

side world. Africa, the United States, and the EU all appear to be looking to Pretoria to offer a solution. Public statements by leaders from these three regions, including specifically President Bush's statements in a joint appearance in June with Mbeki, indicate that no one is prepared to undertake unilateral diplomatic action to Zimbabwe's crisis that would supercede Pretoria.

Why is South Africa moving so slowly? At first glance, political and economic considerations appear to support immediate intervention. With the African National Congress (ANC) still in power in South Africa, many in the government understand what the MDC describes as a struggle against tyranny. Zimbabwe's government has used many Rhodesian-era provisions to limit basic freedoms, imprison opposition leaders, unleash a wave of political violence, and perpetuate electoral irregularities. Tsvangirai currently faces charges of treason that could carry the death penalty if found guilty.

The question becomes more complex when examining the effect of Zimbabwe's instability on South Africa. Over two million Zimbabwean refugees have fled to South Africa, attracted by its relative economic prosperity and discouraged by the inhospitable economic and political situations in other neighboring countries.<sup>8</sup> Domestic critics argue that the influx has contributed to South Africa's declining economy, which has only now begun to rebound. The total economic effect of Zimbabwe's crisis on South Africa over the last three years is estimated to be a loss of \$1.9 billion and 30,000 jobs, as well as a 0.4 percent fall in the country's growth rate.<sup>9</sup> Pretoria is also wary of Zimbabwe-style land grabs spreading to South Africa, since its own

land reform process has been lagging.

A closer examination of the domestic situation reveals that South Africa could benefit by engineering a soft landing in Zimbabwe that ensures ZANU-PF a significant role in a post-Mugabe government. South Africa's ruling ANC remains virtually unchallenged politically. Mbeki will run for a final five-year term next year and is widely expected to be reelected. Yet, the ANC is balancing numerous factions under its umbrella, including an increasingly dissatisfied labor movement upset at the slow pace of economic reform and housing. If the MDC won a free election and added to Africa's trend of labor-based parties unseating liberation parties, the ANC's labor elements could splinter ahead of future parliamentary elections and the 2009 presidential election, for which the ANC has no clear successor to Mbeki. As the current situation stands, the Congress of South African Trade Unions has criticized the Mugabe government, supported the MDC, and pushed the ANC for tougher action on Zimbabwe.

Rather than decrease its support for Mugabe, South Africa has encouraged his inclusion in southern African politics. In July, Mugabe chaired a meeting concerning Nepad, Mbeki's brainchild. He was also named the AU's ambassador to southern Africa at the group's summit in Mozambique last July. South African attendees vigorously defended Mugabe's appointment, while a spokesman for the MDC, Paul Themba-Nyathi, proclaimed that the AU had become a "union of dictatorships."<sup>10</sup>

**Opportunities for Diplomacy.** The next few months will present critical opportunities for outside intervention. On 2 November 2003, Zimbabwe's

High Court began to hear arguments in the MDC's presidential election challenge against ZANU-PF. Although the court has become largely politicized, the outcome is not guaranteed. ZANU-PF has consistently maintained that the withdrawal of the petition is a precondition for any inter-party talks, while the MDC is reluctant to back down from its contention that the 2002 election was

be made in the aftermath of the meeting if African states develop a continental approach to encouraging change in Zimbabwe that departs from past efforts at appeasing Mugabe. How the rest of the continent deals with Zimbabwe could be an opportunity for initiatives such as the AU that seek to demonstrate that continental prosperity stems from encouraging legitimate, peaceful governments. Now

## **President Mugabe** may be willing to return to the negotiating table to avoid embarrassment.

flawed and relinquish a chance to unseat or delegitimize President Mugabe through the courts. An intra-party agreement before the hearing never materialized. However, depending on how allegations of vote-rigging play out in the press, Mugabe may be willing to return to the negotiating table to avoid embarrassment. If the court rules against him, there are still several lengthy legal hurdles to jump before he could be forced out of office—but a ruling declaring him illegitimate would be a crushing political blow. The international community could use this case as leverage to push both sides toward negotiation.

Nigeria has taken an important step in refusing to extend an invitation to Harare for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. By doing so, it has made two important points. First, it has certified that Harare's claims that it has made sufficient strides in advancing human rights and the rule of law do not have factual support. Second, it demonstrates that there is no Western-African split in the Commonwealth and that there is a limit to Africa's patience with Mugabe. Major diplomatic strides could

that Zimbabwe has withdrawn from the Commonwealth, greater pressure will fall on South Africa to lead a continental solution to the crisis.

Finally, the ZANU-PF annual party congress is scheduled for mid-December. Some speculate that Mugabe could use this to either retire or make a major statement regarding his plans for carrying out his term or paving the way for early retirement. He did invite discussion about his succession early this year, although he retracted these comments following mass actions sponsored by the MDC and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). With the recent death of Vice President Simon Muzenda, however, Mugabe may elevate Speaker of Parliament Emmerson Mnangagwa to the position. Mnangagwa has long been considered Mugabe's chosen successor, and his promotion would enable this transition.

The international community can and should influence these decisions. Zimbabwe is in dire need of outside assistance to alleviate its crushing economic and humanitarian problems. If it appears that Mugabe is considering alternatives,

outside pressure would be the key to advancing democratic initiatives, such as a transitional government to set up free and fair elections. A combination of carrots and sticks, such as an alleviation of sanctions or aid promises, are tools that could shape Zimbabwe's future.

**Conclusion.** Intervention, specifically African intervention, can bring about peaceful change in Zimbabwe. It is clear that the power dynamics throughout the continent now demand cooperation between liberation parties, like ZANU-PF, and freely-elected opposition parties with support from labor movements like the MDC.

First, the Commonwealth should remain steadfast in its view of Zimbabwe despite Mugabe's withdrawal. If Zimbabwe wants to petition for reentry in the future, it should be held to the same standards agreed upon at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. This meeting represented perhaps the most far-reaching international consensus on Zimbabwe since indepen-

dence. African countries especially could use this era of open dialogue to seek a solution to the crisis. Diplomatic efforts pushing for talks between ZANU-PF and the MDC would be an excellent start towards bringing Zimbabwe back into the fold. If genuine efforts are made, respect for human rights and the rule of law could follow.

Second, the EU and the United States should expand targeted sanctions and asset freezes. Regardless of the state of diplomacy in Africa, the West should not promote the status quo—complete with external travel and economic opportunities—in lieu of a real solution.

Finally, as a continental leader and the key influence on Harare, South Africa could engineer a transition amenable to all parties. In the eyes of Harare, Pretoria has more legitimacy to intervene in Zimbabwe than any other government. How it handles Zimbabwe will have a lasting effect not only on domestic South African politics, but also on President Mbeki's many regional and international initiatives.

#### NOTES

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