

March 08 Elections: Swim or Sink, Which Way Will Zimbabwe Go?

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1.0 Introduction: A House Built Without Mortar

Great Zimbabwe, the monument, is an imposing structure of stone blocks daringly constructed without mortar. The ruined ancient city, still majestic in its presence, is said to be the biggest ancient stone structure in Africa outside the Egyptian pyramids. This impressive fortress stood for hundreds of years defying time and weather to become not only a national symbol of strength, audacious vision, and power but also a firm footprint and testimony to ancient ingenuity on the African continent. Zimbabwe, the country, born in 1980 following independence from almost a century of British colonial rule, lies prostrate today, ruined like the ancient city from which it got its name. For the past decade, the country has been coming apart block by block. Evidently, like the ruins, the country of Zimbabwe was constructed without mortar.

2.0 The Entrenched Opinions

To search for a genuine comprehensive solution to the current crisis, the true starting point is a correct characterization of situation. There are probably as many contesting characterizations on Zimbabwe as the various interests converging on the country's political and economic landscape. Like in any other situation dominated by entrenched interests, true, objective analysis is the first casualty. The Zimbabwe government projects itself as a victim of a Western imperialist agenda in retribution for the land reform program. It blames western sanctions for the economic problems and dismisses the opposition as a puppet creation of the West. Significantly, this is an account that has been accepted in many circles especially on the African continent. Many leaders in SADC and the AU revere President Mugabe as a liberation hero and consistently stand by him. This was exemplified by their threat to boycott the last AU – EU summit if Mugabe was not invited. Britain and America's disproportionate and very forward role in Zimbabwe tend to give credence to Mugabe's rhetoric. The double standards evident in western foreign policy – where on one hand they embrace dictators like Musharaff and the sheikdoms of the Middle East, whilst preaching democracy and human rights in Zimbabwe – has undermined the credibility of western intervention.

The main opposition (the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and most of the allied civic groups) characterizes Zimbabwe's problems as a "crisis of governance" – a very shrouded term that seems to conceal more than it reveals. The main problem is explained as the illegitimacy of the Mugabe regime whose

authority derives from disputed elections. Zimbabwe's problems are explained as a consequence of Mugabe's failure to uphold the rule of law and respect human rights. Corruption and mismanagement are mentioned as the root cause of the economic crisis. Critics sometimes accuse the opposition of being driven by merely an anti-Mugabe sentiment and lacking a cohesive ideology.

Neither the government nor the opposition perspectives seems to be able to explain why Zimbabwe was already sliding pre-2000, before the imposition of sanctions and before controversial elections. Different as night and day as these two perspectives appear, they are similar in that they identify Zimbabwe as purely political crisis. Glaringly missing a critique of the structural causes of poverty. Also omitted is an appraisal of the unfinished business of the national liberation struggle and how it connects to the present crisis. The Rhodesian economy constructed on the basis of exclusion and maintained through violence continued largely un-restructured beyond 1980. The same violence needed to maintain the pre-independence contradictions was necessary in the independence era where 3 percent of the population owned about 75% of arable land and controlled 80% of national income. Without a serious restructuring of the colonial economy, prioritizing redistribution and expansion of surplus, it is difficult to imagine how a stable new state could have been built.

3.0 The Untold Story

Dating the Zimbabwe crisis to 2000 ignores a very crucial part of the trajectory of the country's present problems. Remember Zimbabwe's two-phase, IMF and World Bank sponsored Structural Adjustment Program (SAP)? Following stunted growth in the late eighties, Zimbabwe adopted a structural adjustment program starting in 1990. Like many other SAPs, this was a "trickle down" project that was supposed to raise standards of living by lifting up business first. In 1990, Zimbabwe implemented the whole package (deregulation of markets including labor and financial, devaluation, public sector restructuring etc). Zimbabwe got the highest possible appraisal from the IMF at the end of the first phase in 1995 – a "highly successful". No one denies that structural adjustment brought about a lot of suffering amongst ordinary people. Even the authors of the project acknowledged this but opined that this was expected temporary birth pangs after which a prosperous "New Zimbabwe" would be born. The reality for Zimbabwe, however, is that the supposedly temporary adjustment pain continued unabated. It is that pain that sparked the first major mass protests in independent Zimbabwe, setting the stage for the nineties to become a decade of struggles against SAP hardships. The demands of these struggles were all economic; cost of living adjustment, tax reduction, and benefits for the working class; These demands included land for the peasantry (who staged the spontaneous farm invasions and were booted out by Mugabe's regime), and payout increments for students. Mugabe became increasingly dictatorial as he desperately tried to contain these protests, thus widening democratic deficit. The demand of the mass opposition only changed from economics to politics in 1999 when CHANGE emerged as a new slogan accompanied by calls of "Mugabe must go".

With the central role structural adjustment played in precipitating an unprecedented economic crisis in Zimbabwe, merely focusing on the political arena is inadequate. The clear link between economics and politics cannot be ignored. Is it even possible to imagine a real transformative and redistributive agenda without acknowledging the economic dimension of the crisis? The dominant analysis on Zimbabwe is consistent to liberal democracy's dichotomous thinking, which artificially separates politics and economics into mutually exclusive spheres; where, politics is played as a public sport and economics is mystified as a private affair. It is time to raise critical questions if the change we are advocating for is the change that the people of Zimbabwe desperately want - a fundamental change in their social, economic and political conditions. Not a mere change in the faces of those administering the affairs of the state.

4.0 The Socio-Economic Crisis

Since the late nineties, Zimbabwe has sunk from an envied position on the African continent to rock bottom in terms of socio-economic standards. Life expectancy fell from 65 years in 1990 to 37 in 2007. Unemployment stands at 85%. Inflation is the highest in the world, last officially estimated at 24,000% according to Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe numbers. The IMF's estimate is 150,000%. Zimbabwe's public health and education sectors, once unrivalled on the African continent, are now in a sorry state. Once, the breadbasket of the SADC region, boasting a very sophisticated commercial agriculture sector, today Zimbabwe is a basket case reeling under perennial food shortages. The country, once showcasing an impressively diversified manufacturing sector, contributing 30% of GDP in 1990 (3 times the African average), is now heavily de-industrialized. Company closures are the order of the day giving rise to sky high unemployment. The economy has shrunk by 40% in the last seven years. The Zimbabwe dollar, stronger than the U.S. dollar at independence, now exchanges at a worthless 1 to 3 million. Medical drugs, fuel, electricity and other essential products are in permanent short supply due to foreign currency shortages.

What this statistical overview does not sufficiently convey is the very desperate human story of survival under such circumstances. So desperate are life conditions that thousands of Zimbabweans are forced to swim with crocodiles in search of hope in nearby South Africa. Millions are in forced economic and political refuge around the world. Yet, there are millions who cannot run – they will have to stay.

5.0 The Democratic Deficit

Whilst the democratic credentials of the early post colonial state is nothing to write home about, the country clearly is worse off the marker now. If the early post colonial state was a white-gloved authoritarian autocrat, now it's a knobkerrie wielding, hard knuckled despot. President Mugabe increasingly relies on ruthless state machinery whose first instinct is violence to systematically suppress any challenge to his power. This was the case in Matebeleland, when

the world turned a blind eye, as Mugabe unleashed an army unit to put down disturbances. This mission left thousands of innocent peasants dead. The only difference is that today everyone is at gunpoint.

Today, Mugabe's grip on power is buttressed by a security regime that acts with impunity, and a plethora of repressive legislation tantamount to a total suspension of the bill of rights. A combination of the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and a whole coterie suppressive instruments amount to a de-facto state of emergency. Thousands of democracy and human rights activists have been detained, tortured and some killed at the hands of the Mugabe regime, whose height of ruthlessness was seen in a senseless crackdown on the informal sector (Operation Murambatsvina) in 2005, which displaced 700,000 people according to UN estimates. Many of the victims of this operation are still in dire need of humanitarian aid. President Mugabe's systematic closure of democratic space in the last 7 years has reduced elections to a farce, hence the widespread skepticism in the forthcoming elections.

6.0 The Political Stalemate

An unyielding political stalemate marks the run up to Zimbabwe's March 2008 elections. The government and the key opposition forces have been lockjamed since 2002, with neither side yielding an inch. The political stalemate, a result of the reality that each side has considerable support and power, is characterized by two key factors; On one side is an entrenched state tightly secured through coercive apparatus and firm social pillars of support, specifically, among the war veterans, the rural peasantry and a parasitic local entrepreneurial class. On the other end is a mass opposition decisively commanding the loyalty of the urban masses and bolstered by powerful international strategic partnerships including Western powers and economic institutions. Whilst the opposition has been strong enough to make it impossible for the state to govern in the old way, it has not been decisive enough to spring to the "tipping point" leaving the two forces locked in an obstinate political stalemate – thus precipitating a political paralysis.

It is the sense that each side needs to "give a little" that compelled both parties to the ongoing SADC sponsored dialogue under Thabo Mbeki's facilitation. Once appearing to succeed in softening the political lock jam, all indications at this point are that the dialogue has collapsed over serious differences on the implementation of the agreed terms. As part of a deal reached through the SADC dialogue, the government and the opposition co-sponsored a constitutional amendment and agreed on a five point agenda (including a new constitution, reform to security and media laws and sanctions). Since the collapse of the dialogue, both sides are back to tough talk and hard lines.

The opposition insists on the postponement of the elections to allow time to implement resolutions of the SADC dialogue including ratification of a new constitution. Zanu PF, the current ruling party, insists the elections will go on as

scheduled (on March 29, 08) and that it will only consider a new constitution after the March elections. As the political environment charges to “high voltage” once again, March 08 does not appear to hold any hope for the desperately needed change, instead it threatens to mark a plunge into more chaos for Zimbabwe. If the election outcome is contested and the country remains isolated, the social economic crisis can only deepen.

7.0 The Progressive Task

Kenya recently took many by surprise. Many are still scrambling to come to terms with the explosion, let alone effectively respond. With the Zimbabwe elections fast approaching, it is important for the progressive community to have a conversation about the situation on the ground. Not only to come up with a shared understanding of the facts and understand existing differences of opinion but more importantly to explore ways to more robustly support democratic forces in Zimbabwe. Further, with the U.S. playing a key role in Zimbabwe, including support to opposition groups and humanitarian efforts and having passed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZEDERA), it is important for the progressive community to understand the interests driving U.S. policy and to advocate for U.S. policies that promote social, economic and political justice in Zimbabwe. The main challenge confronting the progressive community is to understand how best to help rebuild Zimbabwe, this time, with mortar.

8.0 Stop Press

Former Zimbabwe Finance Minister, Simba Makoni, a member of Mugabe’s party’s highest decision making body, the politburo, has announced intentions to challenge Mugabe in the upcoming presidential election. He is rumored to be backed by heavyweights in Zanu PF including former Army General and Zanu PF kingmaker, Solomon Mujuru. Makoni’s entry into the presidential race introduces interesting new dynamics; his candidature can potentially split the Zanu PF vote thus aiding the opposition. At the same time Makoni, widely respected amongst the urban middleclass, can split the urban vote, a traditional opposition stronghold, thereby working to Mugabe’s advantage. Other political analysts have suggested a ‘winning coalition’ that unites Simba Makoni and the fractured opposition as the sure way to defeat Mugabe in March. Whatever happens, Makoni’s challenge represents the most serious internal rebellion to Mugabe since independence. Already, the Zanu PF machinery is trying the same tactics to crush Makoni as it used on the MDC - accusing him of being a stooge of Western interests. In the face of war veterans threatening violence - it remains to be seen if Mugabe will deploy his traditional ‘shock troopers’ to deal with this new threat as he did to others in the past.