

Whither Zimbabwe? Crisis & Democratisation

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When it attained its independence in 1980, there were high hopes expressed for Zimbabwe's political and economic future. It was amongst the top four more industrialized countries in Sub-Saharan Africa; it possessed a more diversified economy than most countries; and it had a better human resource base than most; and it had a middle-income status. Comparatively speaking, therefore, Zimbabwe had better prospects of making a head start in economic and political development than most countries on the continent. For some years, especially in its first decade of independence, it appeared to live up to some of these expectations. There were considerable investments in social development (characterised by a massive expansion in the education and social sectors); the economy itself grew; and it quickly became the regional breadbasket. Furthermore, the country was an oasis of stability in a region then mired in turmoil from Angola to Mozambique, and in liberation struggles from Namibia to South Africa.

By the late 1990s, those early hopes had been dashed. Instead of expanding, the economy had begun to contract; from being a breadbasket, the country had become a basket case. Instead of providing an anchor of stability in the Southern Africa region, Zimbabwe was now a potential source of both political and economic turmoil thereby undercutting the region's efforts to lure investment for growth. Authoritarianism found expression partly in growing levels of political violence particularly during election campaigns. Between 2000 and 2002, the crisis on the political and economic fronts deepened and inevitably raised the concerns of such regional groupings as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Commonwealth and the European Union as well as big powers such as the United States. Concerns which will increase further depending on the outcome of the 2002 presidential election. What went wrong?

The purpose of this article is to present an overview of the dimensions of the crisis that beset Zimbabwe, and the domestic response to that crisis. It has been a response aimed at counter-acting the authoritarianism orchestrated by Zanu-PF party under the leadership of Robert Mugabe. To the extent to which the response has sought to contest and recover political and social space, to that extent, it has been a significant element in contributing to democratic change. This contribution therefore begins by explaining the deepening economic and social crisis, the principal forms of political contestation and the openings created for deeper democratization and solidarity.

The Deepening Economic & Social Crisis

While the 1980s had witnessed a steady consolidation of independence, and both social and economic development, the 1990s turned out to be 'a wasted decade' in several ways. It was a decade which opened with a much vaunted and flaunted 5-year economic structural adjustment programme (E5AP) which promised 5 per cent annual growth, 100 000 new jobs per year, accelerated export growth and significant reductions in budget deficits (Zimbabwe Government, 1991). The first half of the decade was spent implementing a programme crafted in conjunction with the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMP). Under the programme, growth proved elusive at below 1 per cent per annum on average between 1990 and 1995. Instead of creating expanded employment opportunities, unemployment crept up from about 30 to 50 per cent during this period. Poor sequencing of the programme contributed to a significant erosion of the export competitiveness of domestic industry; hasty trade liberalisation resulted in de-industrialization in certain sectors of manufacturing (Sachikonye, 1999). By the end of the E5AP programme, the economy was in a much weaker rather than stronger position. Even the World Bank itself admitted in its audit that the programme, based as it was on orthodox conditionalities, had been flawed from the beginning (Allen, 1999). Issues of sequencing, more realistic restructuring of the public sector and social spending in such crucial sectors as health and education should have been addressed systematically as matters of priority.

However, the more sustained meltdown of the economy occurred between 1997 to the present. Several factors contributed to the deterioration of the fortunes of the economy. First, against more prudent advice, President Mugabe authorised huge un-budgeted pay-offs of above 5 billion Zimbabwe dollars for war veterans who sought a payback for their role in the liberation struggle. The pay-offs sparked a run on the Zimbabwe dollar which lost more than 50 per cent of its value in November 1997, and then subsequently continued to depreciate. From a strong Z\$12 per US\$1 before November 1997, the currency had weakened to Z\$55 to US\$1 (at the controlled official rate), and Z\$300 to US\$1 (on the parallel market) in 2001. The budget deficit ballooned to above 10 per cent. Second, another factor which contributed to the economic crisis was military intervention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in mid-1998 to shore up the Kabila government. For an already weakened economy, the annual expenditure of about US\$360 million was a tremendous strain, and there was still a considerable military presence in the DRC at the time of writing this article. Third, in spite of the crafting of another adjustment programme, the Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPRE5T) in 1998, the Zimbabwe was unable to secure funding from the Bretton Woods institutions (Zimbabwe Government, 1998). ZIMPRE5T which was supposed to run from 1996 to 2000 remained a dead letter while the economy began to shrink. In 2001, it shrank by minus 5 per cent, and in 2002 it is projected to shrink by a further 7 per cent (Budget Statement, 2001). In addition, there was hyper-inflation which climbed above 110 per cent in the first quarter of 2002, while domestic debt levels shot to US\$3.5 billion, and foreign debt to US\$4.5 billion during the last quarter of 2001 (ZIMCODD, 2001). The country was in arrears of about US\$1.2 billion during the same period. Investment flows also diminished especially as the political temperature rose in the 2000 election and the subsequent period. In particular, the political violence which accompanied the electioneering process and the simultaneous land reform process deterred potential investors. Finally, there was an upsurge of corruption at high levels particularly in the late 1990s. One estimation was that up to Z\$17 billion may have wasted through corruption between 1997 and 1998 (ZHDR, 2000). Parastatal corporations especially

those with a monopoly in energy and food procurement experienced deeper levels of graft, while the awarding of such huge contracts as the construction of a new international airport (completed in 2001) was alleged to have been mired in such graft. The intervention in the DRC conflict reportedly provided lucrative opportunities of accumulation for certain political and military leadership through trade in diamond and timber, and other business deals in which the DRC state was involved.

It is therefore scarcely surprising that the economic downturn has intensified an unfolding social crisis. From constituting about 40 per cent of the population in 1990, the proportion of Zimbabweans living below the poverty line had significantly increased to over 75 per cent by 1999 (ZHDR, 2000). Its ranking on the UNDP global human development league moved from a better 111 in 1990 to a worse 130 in 1998. It is likely to have slid farther down the league in the past 4 years. While it has been more of 'poor getting poorer', it has also been one of 'the rich getting richer' with the Gini-coefficient standing at 0, 63. Income inequalities are high with 20 per cent of the population earning 60 per cent of the income (ZHDR, 1998). Some of the symptoms of the deepening poverty have been 'food riots' which have broken periodically especially since 1998, and which have been put down by soldiers. Massive food shortages in 2002 are likely to worsen poverty levels as well as trigger fresh food riots if relief distribution is not undertaken urgently and judiciously. While an estimated 500,000 people were in urgent need of relief in January 2001, the number was expected to increase significantly to 3 million later this year due to widespread crop failure as a consequence of a drought. Zimbabwe's monthly maize consumption is about 172,000 tons but in the last cropping season, the harvest was 1,89 million tons which could meet the country's requirements for only 10 months (*Independent*, 1 March 2002). The strategic grain reserve which used to stand at 500,000 tons has long been run down, and despite warnings early last year from the opposition MDC party for the need to speed up food imports, the government did not begin to respond seriously till the beginning of this year. It is estimated that food imports of between 300,000 and 350,000 tons worth about US\$55 million would be required due to drought-induced crop failure this year. Only a million tons of maize (or half of national requirements) is estimated to be harvested in this current season. Decline in food security will have a direct bearing on poverty levels and feed into a spiraling social crisis.

Deepening poverty and food insecurity are compounded by the HIV -AIDS pandemic which has been stalking the country for the past 15 years. With one of the highest prevalence rates in the world, it has been estimated that about 20 per cent of the productive age-group (of between 20 and 50 years) is affected (ZHDR, 2000). The impact of the economy and society are already quite significant. One estimate is that up to 20 per cent of current work force of skilled and semi-skilled workers would have been lost through HIV-AIDS by 2010. Meanwhile, the population of AIDS orphans is approaching 1 million, and the social implications of this orphaned generation could be far-reaching. In view of the staggering social and economic consequences of the pandemic, it is noteworthy that a syndrome of 'denial' by the political leadership has largely characterized its response to the pandemic in spite of several cabinet ministers reportedly having died from AIDS-related illness in recent years.

The erosion of the erstwhile substantial political base of the Zanu-PF party which had ruled from 1980 must be sought in its poor record in addressing the multiple crisis described above. Incompetence and mismanagement contributed to the crisis. The intervention of the Bretton Woods institutions compounded the crisis as entrenched forms of authoritarianism in 2000-2002 exacerbated it further.

From Hegemony to Political Contestation

The stage was therefore set for intense political contestation which commenced in the late 1990s and became sharper in the period 2000 to early 2002. The contestation was over Zanu-PF's hegemony which has been entrenched for over two decades. Here we may briefly review the rise and the beginning of the decline of that hegemony, and the range of political and social forces which challenged that hegemony. There have been three broad political phases in Zimbabwe since independence in 1980. The first phase broadly covers the first decade of independence during which Zanu-PF consolidated its political power through both 'an iron-fist' measures and later an alliance with the its rival PF-Zapu. On gaining the majority number of seats in the 1980 election, Zanu- PF had begun by being 'magnanimous in victory' through the establishment of a government of national unity and a policy of reconciliation. However, that government of national unity soon collapsed (in 1982) against a background of recriminations between the two nationalist parties thus setting the scene for a civil war in the two Matabeleland provinces. The civil war, which lasted between 1982 and 1987, claimed up to 20,000 lives and left a profound legacy of bitterness in those provinces towards the Mugabegovernment. However, peace negotiations between the two nationalist parties were successful resulting in a unity accord in 1987, and a merger between them in 1989. In retrospect, although the accord and merger brought much needed peace to Matabeleland, it was more of a case of 'unity from above' than 'unity from below', and sustainable as long as the former PF-Zapu leader, Joshua Nkomo remained the undisputed 'baron' in that region. The 1990 election results perhaps represented the highest peak in Zanu-PF's political fortunes when it swept 117 seats out of 120 directly elected seats. In the broader society, the ruling party had become more hegemonic than before or since. But it was a hegemony built on authoritarian tendencies which were underpinned by constitutional amendments which provided for an executive presidency with sweeping powers in a context of a de facto one-party state system.

The second phase broadly consists of the period between 1990 and 1998 during which civil society organisations expanded in quantitative and qualitative terms. They included labour unions, human rights and women's organisations, student and journalists' unions amongst many others. Economic growth in the 1980s had contributed to the swelling of the working, middle and professional classes. Their broad agenda was first to promote the social and economic interests of their membership but as the decade proceeded issues relating to democracy increasingly took the centre stage. Authoritarian tendencies had become more pronounced in a context in which the opposition were very weak. Economic hardships became more intense under structural adjustment. During the 1996 election, voter apathy was particularly marked with only 32 per cent of the electorate participating. So long as the main opposition parties remained moribund under an un-inspiring leadership of such figures as Abel Muzorewa, Ndabaningi Sithole and Edgar Tekere, and as long as they did not consciously broaden their appeal to a wider social base, they stood little chance of dislodging the Zanu-PF party from power. This was the context in which an expanding civil society began to play a crucial role in mobilising the population around civic rights, human rights, economic and women's issues. The more prominent ones amongst them included the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), Zimbabwe Human Rights Organization (ZIMRIGHTS), the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), the Women's Action Group (WAG) and the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA). It was eloquent testimony to their growing strength and national credibility that some of them were able to organise a series of general strikes around both economic and political grievances (in 1997 and 1998), and

mobilise successfully against a draft constitution which sought to leave the authoritarian powers of the president intact (in the 2000 referendum).

The third phase may be said to have begun in 1998 with two sets of tendencies: towards even more increased authoritarianism buttressed by the increased political clout of war veterans under Chenjerai Hunzvi and a creeping militarisation of politics, a spin-off from the intervention in the DRC. The other tendency crystallized around resistance to this authoritarianism, and pronounced autocratic tendencies of Robert Mugabe himself. Not surprisingly, the major opposition party which was formed (in 1999), the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was woven out of the broad coalition of social forces including civil society and its various components such as labour, youth, students, the middle classes and business. It remains a broad movement whose immediate objective has been to dislodge Zanu-PF from power; it possesses both the strengths and weaknesses of a coalition of interests temporarily united to achieve that over-riding objective. The MDC narrowly lost by 5 seats in the 2000 elections which were characterised by widespread and violence, and which were pronounced as less than 'free and fair' by such organisations as the European Union.

Under this third and current phase, it is useful to assess the broader significance of the contest for the presidency in the 2002 election. This pitted the MDC's Morgan Tsvangirai against Zanu-PF's Robert Mugabe and was the culmination of a closely fought campaign process that started in 1999. It reflected a process which produced a seismic shift in Zimbabwe's post-independence politics to the extent that the 2000 election result marked a decisive shift from 'a dominant party system' such as is still found in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Tanzania, where one major party has an overwhelming majority in Parliament. Thanks to that election result, Zimbabwe has become a highly competitive two-party system in electoral terms. Several observations can be made concerning the presidential election campaign. First, it involved two parties separated by a political generation gap: Zanu-PF being nearly 40 years old and led by veterans of the independence; and the MDC being scarcely more than 2 years old and led a leadership in the 40-50 year age group. The different formative influences and political experience of these generations are amply reflected in their outlook and rhetoric. Although about 60 per cent of the electorate is still drawn from the countryside, voters have become more sophisticated in their outlook; the state of the economy now features more highly in their calculations than the symbolism of nationalism and independence. In their view, history and participation in the liberation struggle are no longer the main criteria against which a party or aspiring leader is judged. This is understandably painful to Zanu-PF stalwarts whose derision of the MDC stems from the apprehension that their role as 'custodians' of nationalism and history will be undermined if a new political regime wins power. But as we observed elsewhere:

the country they took over (in 1980) has been changing. The demographics have shifted There has been a generational shift in political outlook and allegiance. Civil society has become dense and sophisticated A party which seeks to assert or maintain its hegemony would need to take into account such changes and shifts. It would need to adjust and 'renew' itself (Sachikonye, 2000).

As the 2002 campaign unfolded, it became clear that Zanu-PF found it difficult to re-invent either itself or its message. Its 78-year old candidate concentrated on his 'nationalist credentials', anti-western imperialist attacks, and above all on the 'land question'. Those who had the temerity to criticise his programme were dismissed as 'sell-outs' to western imperialism and to the remaining small white community. The

inflammatory rhetoric had its counterpart in intimidation and violence (which claimed 31 mainly opposition supporters) and displacement of about 70,000 people between January and March 2002. A clash of political values and traditions was evident in the two different campaigns. While the MDC stressed the need for a peaceful campaign (symbolised by its open palm) in conditions in which 'the rule of law' was respected, Zanu-PF's took a more belligerent tone (expressed in its clenched fist sign) and it actively encouraged the formation of 'a militia' to do its mobilisation campaign. As a sign of a throwback to the distant days of the liberation struggle in the 1970s, Zanu-PF set up about 150 'militia bases' in various parts of the country to spearhead its campaign (*Independent*, 1 March 2002). Invariably, instead of concentrating on wooing the 'hearts and minds' of voters, the bases quickly developed a notorious reputation for intimidation and torture of opposition supporters. Between January and March 2002, newspapers were replete of increasingly desperate such as setting up of road-blocks to demand party membership cards as well as harass those reading independent newspapers such as the *Daily News*, the *Standard* and *Independent*. These repressive tactics were largely condoned by the police.

Other signs of the increasing militarisation of the contest was the appointment of military figures to head the Electoral Supervisory Commission, and mostly war veterans and civil servants to constitute the bulk of the 22,000 election monitors. Furthermore, just before the election campaign kicked repressive legislation in the form of the Public Order and Security Act, General Laws Amendment Act and Access to Information and Privacy Act was rushed through Parliament to undermine the opposition movement and civic organisations. For example, about 80 campaign rallies which the MOC sought to hold were denied them under one of these legislation; and even though the General Laws Amendment Act was later declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, it had already undercut the role of civic organisations in the electoral process. In such an environment, the conditions for a 'free and fair elections' were non-existent.

The campaign issues themselves tended to be buried under a strident rhetoric which did not allow for a sober debate over issues such as the state of the economy, the land question, health issues especially HIV-AIDS, education, crime and security and human rights. While the MOC lambasted Zanu-PF over its economic policies which resulted in an unemployment rate of 70 per cent, and over rampant corruption, Zanu-PF argued that it had now solved 'the land question' once and for all after acquiring more than 8 million hectares for redistribution. Up to 110,000 households are estimated to have received that land, and it was likely that most of them would reward Zanu-PF with their votes. But this was a gamble in view of the widespread shortage essential inputs like draught-power, seed and fertiliser to utilise that land; the drought which has affected large swathes of the countryside has been particularly harsh on the new settlers in a context of food shortages. Meanwhile, the Zanu-PF slogan 'the economy is the land, the land is the economy' sounded increasingly hollow. If the land reform had been carried out systematically, equitably and transparently, there would have been much more domestic and international support for the programme which is currently starved of much needed funding, argued the MDC.

Democratic Struggle &; Opportunities For Solidarity

The politics of electioneering in Zimbabwe in the period 2000-2002 showed how increasingly authoritarian a regime under concerted opposition challenge can become. This repressive response grows the bigger the opposition challenge. Civil

liberties and human rights are among the early casualties of that response. Press freedom is assaulted through bombings of newspaper offices, detention and deportation of critical journalists. State media is transformed into propaganda machines. Civil society organisations are targeted for criticism and threats. Domestic critics are labeled 'unpatriotic', and foreign critics are lumped together as 'imperialists'. An independent judiciary becomes an object of attack. Xenophobia and the 'race card' become handy political tools. Paranoia increasingly marks the country's foreign policy. These developments in Zimbabwe during 2000-2002 underscored the shakiness of the foundations of its post-independence democracy. They also suggested that the liberation movement was unable to transform into a broad democratic movement; the resort to the use of political terror for electoral advantage was a sad illustration of its weakness.

The process of democratisation in Zimbabwe is therefore under severe test. Although there were notable advances in the 1990s in widening the democratic space, the backlash from a threatened authoritarian regime has been harsher than anticipated. But it is a formidable test which should contribute to maturity of the democratic movement both in civil society and in opposition parties. Clearly, as the repression in 2001 and early 2002 proceeded, solidarity became an important force for resistance and change again.

The international community has understandably been concerned about the dictatorial tendencies in Zimbabwe, and constant global press coverage has provided an index of that concern. In a world of instant communications it has become harder for autocratic regimes to control the flow of information within the country, and to and from the country. In this new context, the opportunities for solidarity between a progressive international community and the democratic movement in Zimbabwe have been enhanced. For instance, the petitions of international federations of journalists to the Zimbabwe Government over press freedom helped shape the domestic debate on press freedom. Messages of solidarity and symbolic prizes for editors of the independent press beefed up their morale in difficult circumstances. Similarly, solidarity from international labour federations ensured that if the government trampled on union rights, it would encounter concerted international censure. Thus, for instance, the government could not afford to ignore calls from the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) that it refrain from the repression of unions. Other organisations prominent in 'naming and shaming' government excesses included the global human rights movement (bodies such as Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group), and professional organisations such as the International Bar Association. At critical junctures, international civil society appears to have been more active in demonstrating solidarity with the Zimbabwe democratic movement than individual states and regional groupings.

The outcome of the elections provided a pyrrhic victory for Robert Mugabe, one disputed locally and internationally. Whatever the actual outcome of the 2002 election, and whatever it might have been in other circumstances, a shrunken economy, polarised society and fragile democracy present an extraordinary challenge if they are to be turned around. Given the analysis presented here, there are limited options in reconstructing the economy and restoring both domestic and external confidence. Here international solidarity might play an important role in the consolidation of the democratic movement and in campaigns for debt reduction and access to meaningful levels of investment and development assistance.

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