

Zimbabwe – ‘The government wants the people to give up hoping’

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‘Give ZANU-PF credit, it has ridden the crisis, seen off the opposition and now all it has to do is manage the crisis and aim for re-election and then change the constitution’ – Zimbabwean human rights lawyer, early 2004.

How are we to reconcile Zimbabwe’s seemingly inevitable slide towards being a ‘failed state’ and the continued confidence within ZANU-PF that they can handle the crisis and stay in power until after parliamentary elections due in 2005? More pertinently, what is the popular response to the multilayered crisis of the Zimbabwean state?

Since the government’s defeat in the February 2000 constitutional referendum, ZANU-PF has largely succeeded in reimposing its control through a ‘holistic strategy of repression’. A peace activist described the strategy as a sort of ‘scorched earth policy in terms of social formations ... while it wants to hold elections so as to appear democratic it wants to prevent thought, communication, information, and analysis.’

Broadly speaking the strategy entails a continuation of the militarisation/securitisation of the country, under which these sectors are immune from the law and occupy increasingly prominent positions in intelligence, provincial administration, electoral administration and the like. Secondly, it includes the use of presidential powers – supposedly introduced as part of attempts to clamp down on corruption – allowing police to hold opponents of the regime in prison for up to a month without legal process on charges of ‘subversion’. Thirdly, the regime continues its sustained attack on any foci of independence or opposition.

This strategy has the following elements:

- A state-driven violent land occupation process without resolving contradictions in the rural economy.
- The use of the police and security apparatus against opponents, including the use of sexual violence as retribution.
- The use of terror and judicial intimidation as well as ideological demonisation of the opposition to shut down space for independent voices.
- The ‘restructuring’ of the judiciary towards complete compliance.
- Legal and extra-legal harassment of the independent media, notably through the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act which shut down the Daily News.
- Destabilisation of trades unions, NGOs and other civic bodies. The draft legislation already exists for NGOs to be the next target.
- Widespread torture and intimidation. The opposition has been softened up by four years of sustained repression and abuse. There has been a crackdown on the human rights sector, although brutal intimidation has often been replaced by more subtle forms.
- The co-option or denigration of religious leadership.

- The reorganisation of ZANU-PF structures to ensure a strategy of coercive mobilisation.
- Use of violence as an election strategy with the bodies responsible for electoral administration firmly under government control including use of military personnel.
- The use of the land reform process, the indigenisation strategy, the stripping of state assets and the politically partisan use of government-controlled food as a ‘primitive accumulation’ tool to create a new economic bloc based on party affiliation and loyalty (although its sustainability is open to question).
- An authoritarian economic nationalist (‘anti-imperialist’) rhetoric that has resonance in the region and continent, bringing together race, land and historical injustice in order to demonise the internal opposition and legitimise and maintain ZANU-PF’s rule through repression.

ZANU-PF rides out the crisis?

Since the decision in December 2003 by Harare to react to continued suspension by withdrawing from the Commonwealth, events have seemed to turn ZANU-PF’s way. There have been victories in by-elections marked by the usual violence and intimidation, including retaking the urban constituency of Zengeza in late March 2004. The Reserve Bank Governor Gideon Gono responded to recent dramatic collapses in the banking sector linked to endemic corruption by changing the foreign exchange system leading to an initial decline in inflation. This was combined with a drive against corruption. A prominent ZANU-PF MP and proponent/symbol of black economic empowerment, Philip Chiyangwa, was briefly (and illegally) detained over charges of corruption. Indeed the anti-corruption drive in April 2004 claimed the arrest of the recently appointed finance minister but political lightweight Chris Kuruneri on charges of corruption in terms of illegally dealing in foreign currency.

Does this mean that after years of presiding over gross corruption, systemic human rights abuses, and spectacular economic and political decline, the Mugabe government is about to reform (as in the February Cabinet ‘reshuffle’), re-enter the ‘civilised world’ (as a victory for the ‘quiet diplomacy’ of the Mbeki government) and aim for clean parliamentary elections in 2005?

Certainly Thabo Mbeki has given June 2004 as a ‘final deadline’ for serious negotiations to be underway and (hopefully for him) lead to a government of national unity under a reformed ZANU-PF, but not necessarily under Robert Mugabe. Few in the region and even fewer in Zimbabwe find this believable: so many promises, so many broken – and so many basically untrue claims from Mbeki that genuine talks are about to start.

Perhaps a greater indication of South Africa’s stance was its backing at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva on 15 April 2004, just before South Africa’s own elections, for a successfully carried African/Asian/Russian ‘no action’ resolution on the human rights situation in Zimbabwe – for the second year running.

Brian Kagoro, coordinator of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, said: ‘It is disheartening ... that ... the human rights of the people of Zimbabwe have been reduced to the flexing of muscles between the global South and the global North.’ As long as Mbeki still (in public at least) accepts the Mugabe rhetoric that the crisis is not about ‘governance’ and human rights but about resolving the triangle of race, land and colonial dispossession, serious pressure or ending of South African financial support seems unlikely.

The arrest of Chiyangwa is supposedly linked to the three factions fighting within ZANU-PF over the succession to Mugabe – John Nkomo, party boss, Emmerson Mnangagwa, and Defence Minister Sydney Sekeramayi. Mugabe is thought to have removed his support for Mnangagwa after the latter was named in a recent UN report as heavily involved in the illegal diamond trade from the Democratic Republic of Congo. However both Mnangagwa and Sekeramayi are long term Mugabe allies and were involved in the massacres in Matabeleland in the 1980s. Conversely the Nkomo group are his key allies inside Matabeleland.

This is all part of what appears to be conflict between continuing the 'succession debate' on behalf of Mnangagwa and having no succession debate, meaning Mugabe stays in power. The easiest strategy is for Mugabe to put the succession on hold and proclaim he is staying out his period of office until 2008. This does little, however, to resolve internal and external questions of the legitimacy and sustainability of the regime or Mbeki's diplomatic strategy.

ZANU-PF is likely to continue a strategic mix of coercion, bribery and electoral manipulation for the forthcoming 2005 parliamentary elections. According to the Justice in Agriculture Group there is likely to be a 'ring around the cities' with land being granted to pro-ZANU-PF settlers in peri-urban areas plus some redrawing of urban constituencies to draw in rural dwellers under the party's control. The Harare government thus hopes to get a 'free and fair' verdict which would take the heat off, challenge the international community to lose interest and then be in a strong position to have the upper hand in post-election negotiations with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

In terms of negotiations after elections some elements of the MDC, weakened and weary of constant repression, infighting and lack of direction, may well be tempted to join a 'government of national unity'. Civil society would of course reject such a course given their demand for broad-based negotiations rather than elite deals but their capacity to push this demand is very limited at present.

Another element of the ZANU-PF strategy is the continued use of food as a political weapon in a situation where an estimated five million Zimbabweans will be reliant on food aid. The Famine Early Warning System estimates that Zimbabwe's 2004 season is likely to see a harvest of between 800,000 and 900,000 tonnes, 33 to 38 per cent below its cereal requirements. The government however has stockpiled 240,000 tonnes of maize, has supposedly bought 70,000 tonnes from South Africa and according to diplomatic sources has additional stocks that it has seized. Although the World Food Programme and international NGOs report little overt political interference, the grain at the government's direct disposal provides it with a powerful weapon at election time.

Nor have the Zimbabwean churches in what is a very religious society managed to present a united voice in response to the crisis (or crises). It seemed in mid 2003 that there had been a recovery of the prophetic voice when the leader of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches publicly apologised to Zimbabweans for not bearing witness to the crisis, but this has now been downplayed by the churches seeking to push a negotiations and peace building strategy. The church leaders' dialogue process with ZANU-PF and MDC appears on and off – possibly depending on how much pressure ZANU-PF feels itself under electorally, regionally and internationally (seemingly little at present).

Even if ZANU-PF has the upper hand it has substantial problems. According to the IMF in April 2004, 'Zimbabwe's economy has experienced a sharp deterioration in the last five years. Real GDP has declined by about 30% and is still contracting. Inflation doubled in each of the last three years to reach 600% at the end of 2003... Unemployment is high and rising, poverty has doubled since 1995, school enrolment declined to 65% in 2003, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic [affecting 25% of the sexually active population] remains largely unchecked.'

After a staff visit in March 2004, the IMF called for tripartite talks between government, business and the unions. This was in response to Kuruneri's attempt to reach accommodation with the IMF by making some small repayments to service debt. The IMF had suspended technical assistance in 2002 and in late 2003 initiated Zimbabwe's compulsory withdrawal due to Harare's lack of cooperation and unwillingness or inability to repay the US\$273 million owed (53 per cent of its quota). Nor did Zimbabwe pay US\$110 million owed to the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) – the first and only country ever to have protracted overdue obligations to the PRGF.

It is unlikely that the dual interest rate regime, or the continuing fast track resettlement with its lack of recognition of property rights for either commercial farmers or the new settlers, will appeal to the IMF any more than Zimbabwe's chronic inability to pay its debts.

Nor is Gono's financial strategy guaranteed success economically or politically. Politically, big questions arise immediately – did the Cabinet understand the strategy and will Gono have the heavyweight political backing to carry it through? As Lovemore Madhuku asked, what happens when key ZANU-PF 'untouchables', such as those given licences to import oil without open tendering or favoured by other forms of party/state patronage, become dragged into the war against corruption?

There is little strategy either to address what a local activist in the Catholic church described as the country's simultaneous deprofessionalisation (driving professionals overseas and destroying the sector's autonomy) and decapitalisation. Fifteen to 20 per cent of the population (ie 2–3 million) is living outside the country, mostly as economic refugees, and 500,000, largely farmworkers, are internally displaced.

Even with all of its strategies for staying in power, most delivery systems have collapsed in Zimbabwe making it hard to sustain patronage systems, especially in the rural areas where ZANU-PF needs to maintain its iron grip. And whilst the factions inside ZANU-PF may have been temporarily silenced over the succession, the struggle remains ready to erupt again within the context of fighting over the Gono recovery strategy. Although renewed targeted sanctions against the elite are unlikely to have much material impact, the elite resents them, and they suggest not just (some) international disapproval, but also unwillingness to invest or lend money (not that Zimbabwe has much to offer at present).

There remains the possibility that Mbeki, freshly mandated from the April 2004 elections in South Africa and ready to concentrate on outside matters (although it would seem that peacekeeping in Burundi is of higher importance), will actually put more weight behind his June 2004 deadline. Few Zimbabweans I spoke to would, however, welcome a government of national unity, given that it would be a rerun of the Unity Accord of 1987 when ZANU-PF forced PF-ZAPU into the shotgun marriage of a de facto one-party state.

Without substantial constitutional and electoral changes, any such government of national unity would be suicidal for the MDC. Whilst opposition forces including the MDC have weakened under sustained assault inside the country they appear to have some hope that they are regrouping internationally and in the region. The MDC are currently examining whether or not they should contest the next elections given the manifest impossibility of them being free and fair.

What can outsiders do? What does the future hold?

Many of Zimbabwe's problems are of long term duration. The inheritance of violent colonial dispossession and dehumanisation with the response of (in Brian Kagoro's words) a 'violent and hegemonic struggle for decolonisation ... culminated in a largely symbolic independence devoid of material gain for the majority black population.' This meant an authoritarian elite unable/ unwilling to transform the repressive state colonial structures into democratic institutions, and the emergence of neo-patrimonialism and clientelist structures along with long lasting cultures of intolerance and impunity.

What development there was in the 1980s was concerned with state-building rather than nation-building, within the context initially of apartheid destabilisation, followed by structural adjustment. Once the post-apartheid, post Cold War moments arrived the implications of this history in terms of repression, corruption and abuse became clearer (except of course for kneejerk 'anti-imperialists').

So where do progressives go from here? There is still a massive ideological battle to be won between the prescriptions of what Patrick Bond has called 'exhausted nationalism' and global neo-liberalism, in line with many of the directions pointed to in the various world and regional social fora. Equally Bond points to an existing tradition inside Zimbabwe itself with work on alternate policies having in the past been pursued by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), the coalitions on debt, the United Nations Development Programme, and not least the National Working People's Convention of 1999.

This may help to counter the pessimism of a Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR) partner who saw at present 'a dearth of "thinking", a sort of anti-intellectualism in nearly every quarter ... and essentially ... a kind of absence of politics in the real sense, of positions and ideological clarity and coherence, of strategic thinking and organising.' He added that it is 'very significant that there is a very deep malaise and unhappiness among a large proportion of traditional leaders and spirit mediums, about the disregard for tradition and cultural wholeness.'

Certainly Zimbabweans, while happy to observe stayaways, have not shown great keenness to face the overwhelming firepower of the state on the streets. The sheer struggle for survival and the fact that remittances from abroad are helping keep them alive (and as Gono is aware, the economy as well) cannot be discounted in terms of seeming passivity in the face of desperate circumstances.

There is little leadership either from the MDC – which in any case has done well just to survive itself – from the trade unions or indeed the churches. Although there have been calls, notably by Morgan Tsvangirai, for a much greater coherence amongst opposition forces, notably the ZCTU, the National Constitutional Assembly and the MDC, the sector has great difficulty in doing this. It also has difficulty agreeing on tactics, including on mass action and what its aims are – overthrow Mugabe, force ZANU-PF to the negotiating table, etc. One thing that is unlikely to occur is any kind of armed response.

Outside Zimbabwe there have been a number of initiatives regionally and North-South in bringing together activists and academics in understanding the nature of the crisis. A particularly resonant one was the bringing together of the Zimbabwean and South African diasporas in London. There could be much greater North-South solidarity in a number of fora – NGO, academic, church and use of links with southern African organisations. Outside organisations need to provide support for those in Zimbabwe and the region who are providing information about the human rights and general situation inside Zimbabwe, and those under threat standing up to repression.

There is continuing need for pressure on the ANC government including from within the region. Pressure also needs to be directed at the other elements in the tripartite alliance such as the trade unions and the Communist Party, given Pretoria's assurances to the outside world that Mugabe would step down and serious negotiations would commence. What is it about a transition to democracy inside Zimbabwe that worries them more than the 'chaos that they know'? The International Crisis Group believes that the focus should be on promoting a free and fair election for March 2005 rather than pursuing the chimera of inter-party talks.

There should also be pressure for the long-delayed African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights report on Zimbabwe to be released as called for by Zimbabwean, regional and human rights organisations.

Note: This article, originally published in Pambazuka News 155, is an abridged version of a forthcoming article to be published in ROAPE.