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Zimbabwe at the Cross Roads C What next?

by
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Introduction

Zimbabwe has occupied the centre stage of southern African politics over the last 18 months, particularly since the constitutional referendum, which saw the Zimbabwe opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), emerge as a serious political player. The obvious question is: what is unique about what is going on in Zimbabwe? What is the Zimbabwe ruling elite doing that is really new or different from the rest of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)? The challenge is how do we explain this warlike conduct of politics by the post-colonial ruling elite?

Part of the answer to these questions is to be found in the authoritarian character of the post-colonial state. Scholars such as Mahmood Mamdani have suggested that the colonial state was deracialised but never democratised. According to him, the post-colonial political elite appropriated the structure of power fashioned during the colonial period rather uncritically. Their economic fortunes depended on deploying the state for primitive accumulation in identical fashion to the colonial elite. The post-colonial African state has thus become what has been called the 'engine for development for individual job opportunities and upward mobility'.

Authoritarianism: the flip-side of Globalization

Authoritarian governance has, over the last decade, been exacerbated by the impact of globalisation and attendant market fundamentalism, namely, the idea that economic justice must be reduced to equality of opportunity and expressed through the market. The contemporary march of capital all over the world in search of consumers and markets has visited devastation in many countries. While on the one hand, economic globalisation has unleashed productive forces throughout the world; on the other, it has engendered fragmentation and marginalisation. This has inevitably led to a declining resource base, triggering off unmitigated contestation and conflicts over control of resources. Not surprisingly, the contemporary era of globalisation has been marked by fratricidal wars all over the continent. Zimbabwe has been no exception, and it is against this background that the current crisis must be understood. At a broader level, the Zimbabwe crisis raises a much more fundamental and critical question and that is: how do countries at the marginal pole of the global economy engage the forces of globalisation, and what implications do such strategies suggest for democratic governance and economic management?

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ISSN: 1607 - 2375

8Institute for Global Dialogue

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Zimbabwe's slide to ungovernability

As the economic crisis set in towards the mid 1980s, Zimbabwe's ruling elite shed its socialist rhetoric, and increasingly began deploying the state as the principal tool of accumulation and political patronage. When, from 1992, the Bretton Woods institutions' structural adjustment measures started to have an effect (against a background of two severe droughts, with predictable massive deindustrialisation in the manufacturing sector), the stage was set for a confrontation between ZANU and its urban base. As the standards of living plummeted and job losses increased, the ordinary people increasingly took to the streets and the government showed increasing political intolerance. The collapse of the post-colonial consensus was thus inevitable.

In the midst of the encroaching economic crisis, Zimbabwe entered the DRC war, with devastating consequences for the economy. The first signs of ungovernability appeared in 1997 with the first wave of war veterans' protests, ultimately forcing the government to spend over Z\$ 2.5 billion of unbudgeted funds to pay exasperated war veterans a once-off gratuity and a tax-free monthly allowance. More significantly, the war-veterans' revolt was the first occasion since independence when the ruling ZANU-PF's political performance, record, and legitimacy came under scrutiny. Predictably ZANU-PF demonstrated strong unwillingness to enter into any negotiations about ceding political space.

Once the urban *sans-culottes* - an alliance of the urban crowd and lumpens, the working class, trade unionists, urban based NGOs, disgruntled white classes of capital and property, etc - had entered the political arena with their own independent political demands, it was only a matter of time before this motley collection of disgruntled citizenry coalesced into a political organisation. It was these circumstances which gave rise to the MDC. Patronised by national and international forces opposed to President Mugabe's political style and the ZANU legacy, it was destined to represent the first serious challenge to the ruling ZANU-PF party.

Thus at the beginning of the new millennium, the ruling party had, for all practical purposes, lost the political initiative to the MDC alliance. Their first confrontation ultimately came in the form of the constitutional referendum. Government forced through an unpopular constitutional draft for a simple referendum, which asked only for a *Yes* or *No* vote. The National Constitutional Association (NCA), which had stayed out of the government-led review process, launched the '*No*' the ruling ZANU-PF.

b) **The 'War Veterans'**: The war veterans have probably

campaign. So confident was the government of victory that President Mugabe could announce on the eve of the voting that the government would accept the outcome of the referendum. The referendum, however, turned out to be a vote of no confidence in the government. Rather than focus on the merits of the constitutional dispensation, the voters turned on the government and its failure to deliver. ZANU lost the vote 55 to 45 per cent. The opposition victory literally caught the ruling ZANU-PF and the government off-balance. Suddenly ZANU-PF, which had ruled unchallenged over the past twenty years, was forced to contemplate the possibility of electoral defeat.

Managing the Crisis

The so-called 'Zimbabwe Crisis' is essentially the failure of a kleptocratic elite to respond constructively to a generalised economic crisis. It is, in other words, a reflection of atrophy within the ruling ZANU-PF, the party of the national liberation movement. Basically, the ruling party interpreted the disaffection of its urban constituency as a challenge to its right to rule, and rather than construct some form of consensus, chose to defend its turf. It increasingly distanced itself from its urban base, which it now perceived as a tool of some foreign manipulators. Not surprisingly, ZANU made some fundamental errors. It took on too many battles at the same time, and most notably, picked battles on terrains on which it could hardly win even a single skirmish. Two examples on land and war veterans will suffice.

a) **Land Occupations**: Devoid of a clear and a systematic response to the crisis, ZANU-PF turned to the one issue that had always worked for them, and one which was likely to galvanise a positive response from some section of the population: the land question. Land remains the most controversial point of contestation in Zimbabwe. Less than five per cent of local whites and a group of international speculators own more than three quarters of Zimbabwe's most fertile arable land. The land question has remained largely unresolved over the last twenty years primarily because of the failure of the British to fully discharge their Lancaster agreement commitments and the opportunistic handling of the issue once ZANU-PF came to power. In recent years, this matter has demanded urgent attention. Precisely because of the emotive nature of the land question, it has increasingly become a useful political tool in the hands of a populist political elite. For a government under siege, focussing attention on the land question was always a double-edged sword which could be used to dictate the terms of the discourse of the Zimbabwean crisis while mobilising the rural vote behind

played a similar political role. The background of war veterans in Zimbabwe is actually a telling story of the failure of ZANU-PF as the party of the national liberation

struggle to deliver to its rural constituency. It was the marginalisation by the party of its own rank and file and the creeping authoritarianism within the party and government that gave rise to the emergence of war veterans as a political organisation with an independent agenda. When they first entered the political arena, they did so as a progressive faction within the ruling party attempting to hold the party to its old promises. As already indicated, their first wave of protests was particularly successful in forcing concessions from the state. At the time government was compelled to establish the bona fides of the veterans. A rigorous identification process was established which included the participation of surviving liberation commanders as well as local chiefs. Two years down the road, the leadership of the war veterans appeared to have been won over by the dominant faction of the party and consequently, the war veterans came to assume a different character. Thus the term 'war-veterans' have now come to acquire a new meaning of ruling party militias, controlled by an assortment of party warlords. The majority of the current crop of the 'veterans' are in the 18-24 year age group B a hotchpotch of urban lumpens, and déclassé elements driven predominantly by individual benefit and who are too young to have fought in the war of liberation.

What Next?

With presidential elections less than a year away, a viable solution is unlikely to emerge until after the elections next year. Furthermore, the stakes are rather high and the ruling elite is thus unlikely to simply walk into retirement without a spirited battle. A way out of the current stalemate will thus depend largely on the political will of the major players to enter into meaningful negotiations over the sharing of political space.

President Mugabe and ZANU

The role of President Mugabe in ZANU-PF and government remains a critical factor. He is certainly the only one capable of holding the warring factions of the ruling ZANU-PF together. He is unlikely to step down now for two main reasons. Firstly, it is feared that in his absence ZANU might easily disintegrate into disparate bands of warlords, with devastating consequences for the country. Secondly, stepping down now would be considered capitulation to the enemies of Zimbabwe's liberation.

The Movement for Democratic Change

There is a perception within government and ZANU that the MDC is an arm of international capital and other enemies of Zimbabwe bent on destabilizing the country, and therefore, there is a determined resolve not to accord it the legitimacy of an official opposition. Indeed, the MDC remains a convoluted alliance of strange bedfellows. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that they have a

demonstrable political base in the country. They won close to 50 per cent of the popular vote at the last election. It is therefore essential to recognise that any solution to the present crisis must factor them into the equation.

Possible outcomes

Within the current atmosphere of hostilities, a number of outcomes are probable leading up to the June 2002 presidential elections:

- \$ A ZANU victory on an un-level playing ground: This might allow it to do a quick political about-turn, demobilise the war-veterans, slow down the resettlement programmes, and constructively engage the Bretton Woods institutions and other multilateral and bilateral donor communities. The crucial question however is, just what levels of violence is international opinion prepared to accept?
- \$ A ZANU refusal to concede defeat: This option assumes that ZANU loses the presidential election but refuses to concede defeat leading to mass protests and counter-protests, violence and intimidation as witnessed during the last parliamentary elections. The ensuing contestation over control would throw the country into further chaos, and the economy along with it, ultimately with possibilities of a collapse.
- \$ ZANU concedes defeat and the opposition takes over: The prospects of ZANU-PF conceding defeat and abandoning the state house without a battle is very unlikely. However, were this to happen, ZANU would still remain the only party commanding the loyalty of the repressive apparatuses of the state. ZANU-PF would thus be in a position to render an MDC government ungovernable at will.
- \$ Postponement of elections: A deepening economic crisis would almost render elections impracticable. President Mugabe would have a perfect pretext to declare a state of emergency and probably rule through decrees. Unfortunately, this would exacerbate the political crisis and probably throw the country into greater turmoil.
- \$ A ZANU-PF victory under a new leader: This scenario is less likely. Firstly, there does not appear to be an alternative to Mugabe within the party at the moment. Secondly, Mugabe's departure at the moment would be disastrous for the party. If he did not stand, his successor would lose to the opposition; if he stepped down, the party would probably disintegrate. Thirdly, there does not appear to be sufficient time to sell a new leader to the nation and any attempts to do so with the

election just under a year away might send very confusing signals to ZANU's support base.

§ *A Coalition Government:* This is perhaps the only viable alternative at the moment. If the results of the last parliamentary elections are anything to go by, a coalition government or a government of national unity would make perfect sense. It would provide breathing space to heal political wounds and start meaningful dialogue. But this, as indicated above, would largely depend on the political will of the main players.

Conclusion

It is in the self-interest of South Africa and SADC to begin building some sort of mutual understanding between the protagonists in Zimbabwe, which could bring about some sort of moratorium between the contending forces. To this extent, the Abuja agreement brokered under the auspices of the Commonwealth in September 2001 represents the first serious breakthrough ever since Pretoria launched its quiet diplomacy. Broadly, Abuja represents a quid pro quo between Harare and London. Britain has agreed to provide funding for land reform, in return for Harare agreeing to stop the current spate of violent farm occupations. Harare has consistently accused the UK of renegeing on the earlier agreements; Abuja thus represents some degree of victory for Mugabe. It could always be presented as a victory for the war veterans, thus facilitating their evacuation from the farms. Be that as it may, the breakthrough lies precisely in the fact that Mugabe has for the moment endorsed the deal. So where does this leave things?

The difficult part is not the war veterans and farm occupations. There, Mugabe can trigger at his whim. The main challenge for the Mugabe government is in the small print of the Abuja Agreement: good governance, respect of human rights, free speech, and a level playing field for the forthcoming presidential elections. It is not quite clear whether a deadline has been set for meeting these conditions, nor is it clear what sanctions might be invoked if compliance is not forthcoming. Nevertheless, it is inconceivable that the ZANU government will willingly level the playing field for next year's presidential elections, a fact that is almost tantamount to conceding defeat. It is not far fetched to assume that president Mugabe is probably playing for time and embarking on a tactical retreat from a more damaging confrontation with the white farmers. Like a seasoned political street brawler, he has probably calculated that if he can let go of the white farmers for the moment, the West will probably be willing to look the other way while he prepares to confront the MDC in next year's election.

SADC leaders have probably arrived at a similar conclusion. It is not insignificant that during the recent visit of the six leaders, for the first time, Mugabe was

publicly admonished about lawlessness and creeping political instability. But perhaps more significant, was the decision to talk to other stakeholders - an indication that SADC now recognizes other political players. This is an important step forward and should be pursued with the specific objective of pushing ZANU towards a government of national unity after next year's election. As indicated above, it is the most viable alternative at this problematic juncture of Zimbabwe's history.

Suggested Reading:

'Mugabe's Last Card' in Southern Africa Report, vol 15, no 2000.

Mamdani, M (1996) *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of Late Colonialism*, David Phillips, Cape Town.

Szeftel, M (2000) 'Clientelism, Corruption and Catastrophe', *Review of African Political Economy*, vol 85, no 27, pg 427-441.

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