

Desperate Days in Zimbabwe

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Go hang (Robert Mugabe, March 2007)

No matter how tough it gets... we have an agreement, even if we are murdered we have an agreement (to continue the struggle)(Morgan Tsvangirai, March 2007)

The current SADC mandated mediation on Zimbabwe, led by President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, opens a narrow window of opportunity to avoid further deterioration in Zimbabwe's political and economic fortunes. Brought about by a combination of growing regional embarrassment over Mugabe's authoritarian violence and international pressure, the initiative is faced with enormous obstacles in the form of the persistent recalcitrance of decisive elements of the Mugabe regime. Nonetheless the mediation may present an opportunity to pry open new political spaces in the country. Recent events have provided further evidence of the ruling ZANU-PF's reliance on violence as a form of rule. The public beating of opposition and civic leaders, rank and file Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) members and high profile lawyers signalled an escalation of repression against the political and civic opposition in the country. Faced with deepening economic crisis, a bitter battle over succession within the ruling party, the persistent presence of opposition forces and continued international pressure, ZANU-PF has responded with a characteristic mixture of ruthlessness and contempt.

Towards the end of February 2007, the occasion of President Robert Mugabe's 83rd birthday was marked by a televised interview. Denying that the economy was in dire straits even if people were struggling to make ends meet, he took the opportunity to warn his would-be successors - 'high ranking, ambitious individuals who were looking at themselves' - that he would not be pushed out of office. While the day would come when he would retire, that point had not yet been reached. 'Can you see any vacancies?', he asked rhetorically. 'The door is closed' (BBC News, 21 February 2007). Preparations were anyway well advanced for a huge birthday party to be staged in a football stadium just outside the midlands city of Gweru. For several months, the 21st February Movement, a state youth organisation whose sole purpose turns on Mugabe's annual birthday festivities, had been raising funds and finalising arrangements for the big day. 'Farmers have donated 38 cattle while others said they would bring processed beef', declared one of its leaders:

Our initial target was to raise Z\$532 million (US\$2.1 million) ...but so far we have received well over Z\$700 million in cash and kind (Mail & Guardian, 23 February, 2007).

The contrast between such extravagance and the plight of ordinary Zimbabweans was not lost on local people or on critics of the regime. Such displays, of course, were neither new nor unexpected, but their insensitivity was seen as crassly provocative at a time

when political tensions were rising. As hyper-inflation spiralled ever upwards, from an estimated 1,300% p.a. in the week ending 13 February, to 1,600% a week later, to over 1,700% in March, and predicted to hit 4,000-5,000% by the end of the year (*Mail & Guardian*, 13 February 2007; *Daily Telegraph*, 19 February, 2007; BBC News, 26 March 2007), evidence of acute hardship was everywhere. Emboldened by the manifest desperation of workers whose wages did not even cover the cost of daily transport never mind food, and by the swelling ranks of jobless youths in the high density townships surrounding Harare and Bulawayo, both the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and the *two* factions of the divided opposition MDC had decided to raise their heads above the parapet. A decision by the general council of the ZCTU to prepare for a two day stayaway for early April (*IOL*, 25 February 2007), followed hard on the heels of a declaration by Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of one MDC grouping, that he would launch his campaign for the 2008 presidential election in Harare's Highfield township.

On Sunday 18th February, crowds making their way to attend the rally, for which the required legal permission had been obtained, were dispersed by police firing teargas and water cannon. Clashes between heavily-armed riot police and stone-throwing protesters ended with an unknown number of assaults and the arrest of 122 people. In Bulawayo, a march through the city led by Arthur Mutambara's MDC faction was broken up in similar fashion. The next day, Highfield's deserted streets were still being patrolled by riot squads on foot and in armoured trucks. A heavy police presence was in evidence around the township shopping centre where roadblocks remained in place. Meeting on Tuesday, the Cabinet decided to ban all opposition political gatherings in Harare for three months. 'The regime is panicking', announced a spokesman for Morgan Tsvangirai. 'They are trying to impose a state of emergency. This is tantamount to banning the MDC and all political activity'. But the MDC, he declared, would ignore the ban and continue 'to organise our rallies and meetings where necessary' (*Mail & Guardian*, 22 February 2007).

On the face of it, the ruling party certainly had plenty to be concerned about. Serious splits within ZANU-PF had burst into the open in December 2006. A Mugabe-backed motion to combine the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, ostensibly on grounds of efficiency but actually to extend his term of office until 2010 was not endorsed by conference delegates. In particular, it promised to frustrate the succession ambitions of the increasingly impatient factions clustered around retired army general Solomon Mujuru and his wife Joice, still deputy vice president but no longer enjoying Mugabe's favour; and Cabinet minister Emmerson Mnangagwa. More worrying for the regime were the first public signs of disaffection amongst rank and file members of the police and army. Claims to this effect carried by *The Zimbabwean* towards the end of last year now found independent confirmation. In late January 2007, junior officers were reported as having mutinied over low pay, this coming after a warning by the Commissioner of Police that 'pay disparities within the security services risk(ed) propelling officers into "active rebellion against the government"' (ICG, 'Zimbabwe'; *Mail & Guardian*, 9 February 2007; *Zimbabwe Standard*, 17 February 2007).

Mugabe himself, however, displayed little outward sign of concern. Short-term measures to alleviate discontent took the form of the immediate issue of food rations to lowly-paid junior army officers and their families, with similar arrangements for the police to follow. Each junior officer received a ten kilogram bag of maize meal, two litres of cooking oil, a one kilogram packet of fish, and a one kilogram packet of sugar beans (*Sunday Times*, 18 February 2007). As the mouths of those higher up the food chain had had long been stuffed with gold - 'majors, colonels, lieutenant colonels and brigadier generals are pampered with (Toyota) Prados, residential stands in posh suburbs like Borrowdale, Chisawash Hills, and farms' - their loyalty was more certain (*Mail & Guardian*, 9 February, 2007). But leaving nothing to chance, the Central Intelligence Organisation began deploying secret agents inside the police and army with the aim of flushing out officers suspected of sympathising with the opposition (*Ibid.* 9 March 2007).

Satisfied that the situation was well in hand, Mugabe then flew off to Namibia on a four-day official visit. Ever true to form, Mugabe used a speech at a dinner hosted by the Namibia Chamber of Commerce and Industry to rail against the 'nonsense' touted by the International Monetary Fund. 'If you follow the IMF you will not go anywhere. They will always prescribe for you', he told his appreciative audience.

We can help each other among ourselves. When we don't have that capacity, then we are like economic slaves. We go begging. There are still countries in Africa which go begging for money in order to pay their civil servants, and they got independent in the 1960s (*The Star*, 5 March 2007).

Yet in Harare and Bulawayo, it was precisely the civil service, reeling under the shock of recent price increases which had pushed the cost of living for a family of five up to Z\$686,000 a month, from Z\$460,000 only a month previously, which was now threatening strike action (*Financial Times*, 17 March 2007). To observers, it seemed that 'economic meltdown' would propel ZANU-PF towards change, 'since business interests of key officials are suffering'. In a report released on 5 March, the Brussels-based ICG argued that 'after years of political deadlock and continued economic and humanitarian decline, a realistic chance has at last begun to appear in the past few months to resolve the Zimbabwe crisis, by retirement of President Robert Mugabe, a power-sharing transitional government, a new constitution and elections'. For all that, elements of the report had the appearance of a wish-list rather than a likely scenario, its claim that sections within ZANU-PF were not only pushing for Mugabe's retirement but also negotiating transitional arrangements with the MDC, clearly hit the rawest of ruling party nerves (ICG, 'Zimbabwe'). The very next day, the Minister of Information, Sikhanyiso Ndlovu, angrily denounced the report and its authors as guilty of 'political hallucination'. 'No one within its (ZANU-PF's) ranks is poised to betray the national liberation legacy that binds the ZANU-PF government with the masses', insisted Ndlovu. The government, he said, remained 'people-centred' (*IOL*, 8 March 2007).

Be that as it may, it was certainly prepared to beat people who stepped out of line. In late February and early March, members of the National Constitutional Assembly, an umbrella grouping of opposition movements, defied the recently imposed ban on

demonstrations by staging marches in Harare, Bulawayo and other urban centres. Those taking part had been arrested and assaulted by the police, but this sporadic violence went largely unnoticed by the outside world until renewed clashes in Highfield between demonstrators and the police resulted in mass arrests, beatings and the death of one opposition activist. On Sunday 11 March, a prayer meeting called in Highfield's Zimbabwe Grounds by the Save Zimbabwe Campaign dissolved in chaos as heavily armed riot police used road blocks, tear gas, and water cannons to prevent people from reaching the event. As running battles erupted between stone-throwing activists and police, one man was killed and more than 100 were arrested. According to a police spokesman, MDC supporters hurling stones and teargas at the police, had defied orders to disperse.

One person has been shot dead by the police and three police officers are detained at Harare Hospital after sustaining serious injuries during an attack by MDC thugs this afternoon ...Warning shots were fired and the group still advanced. The police shot one male adult, who appeared to be the leader of the group, in the chest.

The arrest of MDC leaders Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambura, and other party officials 'going around inciting people to come and indulge in violent activities' was confirmed (*IOL*, 3 March 2007; *Ibid.*, 12 March 2007; *Cape Times*, 12 March 2007).

By Tuesday, that is, two days later, it had become apparent that those arrested had been repeatedly and brutally assaulted while in police custody. Photographs of bruised and battered MDC members flashed around the world, particularly those of the grotesquely swollen features of Morgan Tsvangirai, whose skull had been fractured, it was subsequently confirmed. As Tsvangirai and other detainees, many alleging they had been tortured and some with broken limbs, were released into hospital care after briefly appearing at Harare Magistrates Court, it seemed that the Mugabe regime had spectacularly miscalculated the consequences of its heavy-handed actions. Far from the beatings having had the desired effect, they had revitalised a divided opposition which for some time past had been going nowhere. They had driven Tsvangirai and Mutambura together, if only for the moment, and they had left the MDC in undisputed possession of the moral high ground. 'There are lots of people who've been subjected to this kind of torture, this kind of brutality by this regime', declared Tsvangirai from his hospital bed. 'It just shows the extent to which this brutal regime is trying to protect its power. For the struggle, I think it's an inspiration to everyone. There is no freedom without struggle, and there is no freedom without sacrifice' (*BBC News*, 14 March 2007; *The Independent*, 15 March 2007).

International condemnation of Harare's actions was quick in coming. Citing eyewitnesses who claimed that activists had only turned on the police after the fatal shooting, most foreign media coverage was extremely critical of the official version of events which blamed the opposition MDC for the violence. Amongst the first to weigh in was United States Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, who demanded Tsvangirai's immediate release. 'The world community again has been shown that the regime of Robert Mugabe is ruthless and repressive and creates only suffering for the people of Zimbabwe'. The

US, she said, would hold Mugabe personally responsible for the safety and well-being of those in custody. She was joined in her condemnation by the UN Secretary General, by the European Union, and by Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Even the discredited former colonial power, Britain, managed to muster a junior Foreign Office minister, who described the situation in Zimbabwe as 'appalling' (*Daily News*, 13 March 2007; *Mail & Guardian*, 14 March 2007; *Zimbabwe Independent*, 16 March 2007)

Paying no heed to Western criticism, Mugabe acted accordingly. On same day that the police were unleashed in Highfield, Mugabe had announced his intention of standing for another sixyear term of office. Any lingering doubts about his seriousness of purpose were dispelled at mid-week when the offices of the ZCTU were raided by members of the CIO.

In Bulawayo, Gweru, Kwekwe, and Mutare, more than 100 opposition supporters and students activists were rounded up and arrested. By this point, protest within the region had begun to mount. For the South African Foreign Affairs Department to observe only that 'the problems of Zimbabwe will be resolved by the people of Zimbabwe' was 'disgraceful in the face of such massive attacks and human rights, especially coming from those who owed so much to international solidarity when South Africans were fighting for democracy and human rights against the apartheid regime', noted a COSATU spokesman. Stung by such sharp criticism coming from one of its partners in the Tripartite Alliance, South Africa's ANC government belatedly called on Harare 'to ensure that the rule of law including respect for the rights of all Zimbabweans and opposition leaders is respected', but beyond that point it was not prepared to go. (*IOL*, 13 March 2007; *Mail & Guardian*, 14 March 2007)

For Mugabe, what was *crucial* was South African president Thabo Mbeki's silence and implied support. Nothing else mattered, not even Ghanaian president and current African Union chairman, John Kufor's off-the-cuff remark that the situation in Zimbabwe was an 'embarrassment'. Much more significant was public support from the Angolan government for the 'appropriate measures' taken by the Zimbabwean police in dealing with violence. In Harare to sign a security cooperation accord, Angola's Minister of the Interior referred warmly to the ties of friendship between the two countries which dated back to the days of the liberation war. These ties, he said, had now been strengthened (*BBC News*, 13 March 2007; *IOL*, 16 March 2007; *Financial Gazette*, 16 March 2007; *The Herald*, 19 March 2007). Also in the Zimbabwean capital was Tanzanian president, Jakaya Kikwete. His Tanzanian counterpart had visited as a brother and an ally explained Mugabe, unlike the West

which has always supported the opposition here and elsewhere .. Naturally, we take great exception to any support that has been given by foreigners or representatives of foreign countries to the political parties or opposition in the country. When they criticise Government when it tries to prevent violence and punish perpetrators of that violence, we take the position they can go hang (The Herald, 16 March 2007).

Quite who was responsible for the escalating violence was far from clear. Over the next ten days, that is, the second half of March, there were reports of sporadic clashes between opposition activists and riot police, mainly in Harare and Bulawayo townships, but in smaller urban centres too. Four police stations were petrol-bombed, three in and around Harare, and the other in Gweru (*Financial Gazette*, 16 March 2007; *Zimdaily.com*, 17 March 2007; *The Herald*, 28 March 2007). A ZANU-PF office, a house belonging to a ZANU-PF councillor, two supermarkets, and a night club were all attacked. Boulders and logs were placed across the main railway line leading into Bulawayo, and a Bulawayo-bound passenger train was petrol-bombed as it was leaving Harare (*Zim Online*, 16 March 2007; *The Herald*, 28 March 2007) These and other violent episodes were seized upon by Western countries and Harare alike, but for very different reasons. For the former, it was all part of growing evidence of the long-predicted uprising by a population driven beyond endurance by an incompetent and tyrannical regime. 'What I think we have seen in the last week is that people have turned a corner', claimed the US ambassador to Zimbabwe. 'They're not afraid any more' (BBC News, 21 March 2007). This was not at all how Harare saw events. One week after the arrests and beatings administered to his opponents, Mugabe solemnly pointed to 'terrorist attacks that are part of the desperate and illegal plot to unconstitutionally change the government of the country' (*Sunday Mail*, 18 March 2007).

Even as Harare assiduously compiled a dossier of such 'terrorist' incidents, its agents continued severely to assault and arrest MDC office-bearers and supporters (*The Times*, 20 March 2007; *The Independent*, 21 March 2007; for the dossier itself, see Zimbabwe Republic Police, 'Opposition Forces in Zimbabwe. A Trail of Violence 1 January 2007 to 15 March 2007'; *Ibid.*, Vol. 2). The initiative was now beginning to slip away from the opposition, for all that its leaders talked up the prospect of change. 'We are in the final stages of the final push', declared Arthur Mutambara.

We are going to do it by democratic means, by being arrested, beaten, but we are going to do it. We are continuing with defiance in spite of what Robert Mugabe says. We are talking about rebellion, war ...Mugabe is fighting against his own people. That is war against the people. Already there is violence.

'Things are bad', Morgan Tsvangirai said in an interview, 'but I think that this crisis has reached a tipping point, and we could see the beginning of the end of this dictatorship in whatever form' (*The Times*, 17 March 2007; *The Independent*, 19 March 2007). Other MDC members were not convinced. 'For all the publicity of the past week, the fact remains that the opposition hasn't been able to mobilise tens of thousands of people which is partly to do with fear, partly to do with divisions in the opposition and partly to do with a shocking lack of information for ordinary people about what is going on', observed one opposition Member of Parliament. 'This is a very weak population; weak economically, unhealthy because of AIDS, and a population that is starving' (*The Guardian*, 20 March 2007). With a call by the Catholic Archbishop of Bulawayo for the population to fill the streets in protest falling on deaf ears, a note of caution crept into MDC pronouncements. Prudently distancing themselves from petrol bomb attacks, not least because of mounting suspicion that some had been the actions of agent provocateurs

in the pay of the state, opposition leaders now acknowledged that it was 'too early to talk of victory or tipping points' (*The Zimbabwean*, 22-28 March 2007; BBC News, 26 March 2007; *The Independent*, 28 March 2007).

With opposition hopes for change increasingly pinned on a combination of external pressure and the ambitions of disaffected ZANU-PF party barons, the regime in Harare was sufficiently confident that it had regained control of the situation to lift the ban imposed on political meetings and demonstrations. It did, however, take the precaution of sending armed police and CIO operatives on the rampage through Chitungwiza where a rally was scheduled, in order to beat MDC activists into submission (*The Herald*, 26 March 2007; Zimdaily.com, 27 March 2007). Having accused Morgan Tsvangirai the previous day that 'you want to rule this country on behalf of Blair, (but) as long as I am alive that will never happen', Mugabe rammed home the message by authorising the temporary re-arrest of the MDC leader and his senior aides (BBC News, 28 March 2007; *The Independent*, 29 March 2007).

By mid-week, the Zimbabwean president was in Dar es Salaam for a meeting of the 12-nation SADC, where, according to Western prognostications, he was due to come under unprecedented pressure to accept an exit package and make way for an interim government. Instead, Mugabe briefed his fellow leaders on 'MDC violence which its Western backers wanted to use to bring Zimbabwe under the UN Security Council'. Their attention was drawn to a dossier detailing 'acts of terrorism' carried out by the MDC's underground 'Democratic Resistance Committees', members of which were fortuitously being charged in Harare with attempted murder in connection with a string of fire bombings, even as the Summit was meeting (*The Herald*, 26 March 2007; BBC News, 29 March 2007; *IOL*, 30 March 2007). Apparently impressed and certainly unwilling to bow to Western pressure, the SADC leaders rallied around Zimbabwe's autocratic ruler. Far from criticising Mugabe, they directed their fire at the West. Recalling that 'free, fair and democratic presidential elections were held in 2002 in Zimbabwe', and reaffirming 'its solidarity with the Government and people of Zimbabwe', the official communiqué called for the lifting of 'all forms of sanctions against Zimbabwe', while reiterating an appeal to Britain 'to honour its compensation obligations with regard to land reform'. Almost as an afterthought, President Mbeki was mandated to promote political dialogue within Zimbabwe (*The Herald*, 30 March 2007; BBC News, 30 March 2007).

Pleased with what he described as an 'excellent meeting', Mugabe returned home to further good news. Addressing a crucial meeting of his ruling ZANU-PF party, he claimed that he had not heard one word of criticism from his fellow southern African leaders at the summit just ended. Morgan Tsvangirai, he said, 'deserved to be assaulted', and to thunderous applause, he dismissed Western hopes of regime change. 'Both governments of Bush and Blair think we have reached what they term a tipping point because of the hardships wrought by the illegal sanctions they have imposed on us ... They are gravely mistaken'. Confounding MDC and Western expectations that the powerful factions associated with Solomon Mujuru and Emmerson Mnangagwa would unite to depose him, Mugabe was again selected as the ZANU-PF presidential candidate for the 2008 election. This election would coincide with elections for parliament, which

would be brought forward by two years. Standing on the steps of ZANU-PF's headquarters, and surrounded by cheering supporters, an obviously jubilant Mugabe denounced the West and Britain in particular, for funding the 'violent' MDC. 'We can never entertain ... a party that is walking the road of terrorism', he told the crowd in footage subsequently screened on national television. 'We will not allow that in Zimbabwe' (BBC News, 30 March 2007; *The Times*, 30 March 2007; *Mail & Guardian*, 31 March 2007).

The SADC invitation for Mugabe to enter into mediation with the opposition, is a process that the Zimbabwean leader cannot easily refuse if he is to maintain the integrity and support of the region. Developing regional solidarity has all along been a key element of Mugabe's survival strategy. It is certain, however, that Mugabe will make the mediation process as difficult as possible for his South African counterpart, Thabo Mbeki. Already the period since 11 March 2007 has witnessed continued arrests, violence, torture and killing of MDC activists, usually on allegations of terrorism. Equally significant is the fact that the recent violence is ZANU-PF's introductory gambit into the mediation process. Mugabe is likely to drag out the mediation for as long as possible, even as he prepares for another problematic election in 2008. The Zimbabwean government has already announced that a general election will take place at the end of March, and the current general assault on the opposition indicates Mugabe and ZANU-PF's election campaign is already underway.

Both Presidents Mbeki and Mugabe understand that the opposition forces in Zimbabwe have been seriously weakened by a combination of state repression, the split within the MDC, and a lack of support within the region. The MDC are unable to exert strong internal pressure as a bargaining strategy in the talks. This places the organisation in an invidious situation, in which their major points of pressure are a reluctant SADC mediation, pressure from the West and the possibility of a resurgent opposition in the future. The balance of forces in the current context thus weighs heavily against them. For Mugabe the two major pressures that confront him are the rapidly declining economy and the factional battles in his party. The indicators of decline in Zimbabwe have become a standard global reference for economic failure. At the time of writing, the inflation rate stands at about 3,700%, while by 2006 the GDP per capita was 47% below the level in 1980. At the end of 2006 the average minimum wage of Zimbabwean workers was only 16.6% of the Poverty Datum Line calculated at December 2006 levels, while the formal sector decreased from 1.4 million in 1998 to 998,000 in 2004. When these indicators are combined with anticipated shortage of food this year and the continued loss of high level skills from the country, the picture is bleak indeed.

An important dimension of the factional struggle within ZANU-PF is about a strategy for the *normalisation* of relations with the international community, one that will provide the party elite with time and space to consolidate recently acquired wealth. The terms of this reengagement will form the core of the mediation talks, while the future of Mugabe himself will be a major feature of this normalisation. On this matter, the veteran leader does not feel that he can hand over the torch to anyone else. It is for this reason that the ruling party structures were manipulated to ensure Mugabe's presidential candidacy in

2008. From this perspective, mediation is about making as few reforms as possible to gain acceptance for an election next year. On the other hand, the opposition faces pressures of growing national and international impatience with their divisions, and the prospect of major strategic and organisational dilemmas should mediation fail to open up new political spaces. This is not the best position for the Zimbabwean opposition to be in, but it is the reality that has to be confronted and negotiated.

More broadly, it is the dilemma of postliberation opposition movements that must confront the anti-colonial discourse of authoritarian nationalist governments, with a political language that negotiates the tensions between democratic political questions, and the pressures of redistributive economic demands. It may be that in the current regional and global context, diminished economic alternatives will continue to provide the conditions for generating renewed authoritarian nationalisms. However the challenge of developing an alternative, and more tolerant, language of national belonging remains an urgent task.

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