

Signs of crisis in Zimbabwe

The current economic crisis in Zimbabwe, largely induced by inept government policy, will not be resolved in the near term. However, there is, at present, no overwhelming threat to the continued rule by Robert Mugabe and he will probably continue to be President as long as he wants to. More importantly, there is no alternative in the country to ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front), the party that has ruled since independence in 1980.

Analysis

Zimbabwe in Crisis

The signs of crisis in Zimbabwe are obvious. Late last year, the government announced a new plan to seize 1,470 white farms (40% of the total white farms in the country) to finally make good on promises made since independence to restore land to the peasants. Government said that it would only reimburse farmers for the capital improvements on the land although it does not have the funds even for that. The Zimbabwe Dollar proceeded to crash on 14 November 1997 and lost 45% of its value. Since then, the government has dithered, taking farms on and off the seizure list while clinging to the (unfounded) hope that foreign donors will see their way to paying for the land grab. Markets, seeing the government uncertain about how to deal with the single most important economic issue the country faces, have retreated across the board.

The Swiss-based World Economic Forum now rates Zimbabwe 20 out of 23 countries in the African competitive index, a truly extraordinary accomplishment given the advanced economy ZANU-PF inherited in 1980 and the poor state that many other African countries are in. Indeed, the government has not resolved many of the economic

problems that have plagued it since the mid-1980s. The government still periodically imposes controls (most recently on maize) in response to unpopular price increases, wrecking chaos on business plans. The parastatals still lose large amounts of money but ministers interfere to prevent those organisations from making rational economic decisions (most recently by keeping Air Zimbabwe from laying off workers). Interests groups (veterans, unions) are promised large amounts of money outside of the budget. As a result, the government's deficit is now at 10% of GDP. Interest rates, responding to the avaricious government, are at roughly 45%.

Some of the schemes to Africanise the economy have metamorphosed into convenient avenues to reward **President Robert Mugabe's** extended family of ZANU-PF stalwarts. Most recently, a major bank supported by the ruling party crashed, sending shock waves through the financial sector.

Economic planning continues to be muddled. ZIMPREST (Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation), the current economic plan, was two and a half years late and was dead on arrival. It assumes, unrealistically, that the country will receive US\$500 million in

concessional foreign aid and foreign investment a year and that the government will suddenly find the *fiscal discipline* necessary to cut the deficit in half. The plan suggests that 44,000 jobs will be created each year when the country has, on average, only managed 8,300 annually between 1990 and 1995.

Harare has recently witnessed several violent protests directed at government economic policies. The unions, in an environment where *economic growth will be close to zero*, are increasingly hostile and have pledged further protests. Student groups and non-governmental organisations are now openly hostile to Mugabe.

Mugabe in Control

Zimbabwe is now obsessed with talk of Mugabe resigning and the chattering classes in Harare engage in continual speculation about possible successors. Hopeful students talk of parallels to Indonesia while political operators make plans for new parties. They will probably be disappointed.

In general, economic mismanagement has never been the primary factor in the overthrow of an African leader. Otherwise, **Mobutu, Nyerere, Kaunda** and many others would have been overthrown well before they actually left office. Given that most African countries, including Zimbabwe, still have most of their populations in the rural areas and given that a large share of the urban population is involved in 'informal' activities, it is hard to mobilise large numbers of people to confront the government through planned protests. Rather, the population, in the face of government-induced economic crisis, tends to try to escape. Households decrease food production to near self-sufficiency levels, businesses become "informal" to avoid taxes, and government employees stop going to work in order to pursue vocations where they are

actually paid. Rather, transitions in Africa usually occur because governments implode due to a lack of revenue and then opposition leaders find power lying in the streets. In particular, the security forces simply do not show up when a threat to the government finally appears.

At 74, Robert Mugabe is (along with Sam Nujoma) among the last of a generation of African politicians who believed that it was their right to rule until death in exchange for leading their countries to independence. That he came to power later than almost all of his peers has, if anything, strengthened his apparent desire to rule for as long as possible. The fact that his and his extended family's now considerable wealth is directly linked to the government fiscus is also a profound incentive to stay in power as long as possible. Mugabe now has a young wife who has distinguished herself by her ability to spend large amounts of money as quickly and as conspicuously as possible.

In addition, while Zimbabwe is facing a severe crisis, it is not bankrupt in the way that most African countries were when democratic forces overthrew authoritarian leaders in the early 1990s. It is true that the army is no longer a serious fighting force but it can still beat up rioters and put down popular protests. In addition, the security forces show every evidence of being loyal to Mugabe and to ZANU-PF. The patronage to keep the now impressive number of ZANU clients in line also continues to flow.

Significance

ZANU Beyond Mugabe

Actuarial risk suggests that, at some point in the near future, Mugabe will leave the political scene. However, he will most likely be succeeded by one of his comrades who has been at his side for the last 18 years and who is extremely unlikely to take the coun-

try on a radically different course. Indeed, Mugabe and a few other senior leaders have so dominated the country for so long that the next generation of leaders — like Justice Minister Emmerson Mnangagwa and Security Minister Sydney Sekeremayi — are considerably younger and have bided their time while watching their elders feed at the national trough. Upon coming to power, these leaders may very well believe that their time has come. They certainly cannot be considered ‘new men’ who might dramatically change the country’s economic trajectory.

Several features peculiar to Zimbabwe also make it particularly difficult to oppose ZANU-PF. As the party that led the bloody struggle for independence, the ruling movement still has a degree of legitimacy amongst the population that goes beyond simple economic calculations. With the absorption of Joshua Nkomo’s ZAPU into ZANU-PF in the late 1980s, no other party can lay claim to revolutionary legitimacy. Further, any individual leader who seeks to come to power will have to answer the question of what they did during the war. As in the USSR or Israel, a role in the revolutionary struggle may be a prerequisite to rule in Zimbabwe for many years to come. Of course, technocrats who might be favourably disposed to implement IMF/World Bank reforms are unlikely to meet the fundamental test of popular legitimacy. Further, opposing ZANU-PF has traditionally been difficult because of the role the white population has played. Whenever opposition politics has gathered momentum in the eighteen years since independence, ZANU-PF has been successful in painting its opponents as puppets of the former rulers. An African critique of ZANU-PF has now emerged but playing the race card will be possible as long as the struggle against white rule remains a central memory for a significant portion of

the country’s population. Whites in prominent roles in an opposition party are particular liabilities because the country really does not have a precedent for legitimate multiracial politics.

Possible Scenarios

Two predictions regarding the next two to three years are possible for Zimbabwe.

First, civil strife will continue. Zimbabwe, although poor by almost any standard, does have a far better transport and communica-

tions infrastructure than most countries in Africa. As a result, it is relatively easy to broadcast messages of protest against the government and to mobilise support for (at least) street protests. Zimbabwe also

has a denser civil society network formed by non-governmental organisations, unions, businesses, press organisations, and other organisations that exist outside the formal government sector and which are able to function and communicate with each other far better than in most African countries. As a result, it seems reasonable to believe that, absent some fundamental change in the policies of the Mugabe administration that would address the increasing concerns of mobilised sections of the population, protest will increase in frequency and violence through the medium-term.

Second, it should be clear that this increasing violence will in no way threaten the continued rule of Robert Mugabe or necessarily deter him from the actions that he seems determined to undertake. ZANU-PF is also unlikely to be overthrown in the next few years. As a result, Zimbabwe will increasingly resemble Kenya or Nigeria: countries where there is significant opposition to the regime and occasional outbreaks of violence but no expectation that popular mobilisation will change policies or threaten the government itself.

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