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Zimbabwe: 90 Days after the elections

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On 24 and 25 June 2000, Zimbabweans went to the polls to elect a new parliament. The electoral campaign had been marked by violence and intimidation on a scale unprecedented in the country. The principal targets of this had been opposition candidates and their supporters. In an effort to divert attention from the broader issues before the electorate, state agencies orchestrated and funded the invasion of a large number of white commercial farms, thus attempting both to intimidate people it saw as providing material support for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and to revive the unfinished business of the liberation war in the minds of the rural population. While there was nothing especially novel about the resurrection of the land issue at election time, the vehemence and violence that accompanied it were unexpected. Certainly, it also did further damage to Zimbabwe's image as a state in which law and order would be respected by the authorities, who chose to ignore a number of court judgements requiring the invaders to be evicted. The implicit assault on the right to property was also extremely damaging in international terms.

Nor did the electoral rhetoric of the President and his lieutenants reassure those concerned for Zimbabwe's economic and political health. The re-invocation of the Chimurenga, the war for liberation, and the identification of the MDC with the old enemy, the whites and the British colonialists, among other foreign devils, were hardly calculated to convince that the ruling party had a firm grasp of reality, or that it was about to embark on a course of reconciliation with the international donor and investment community. Nonetheless, there were those who were willing to believe that these were but the aberrations of electoral campaigning and that, the immediate competition concluded, matters would assume a calmer and more reasoned character.

Such optimists were encouraged by the relatively peaceful conduct of the voting itself. The turnout, at 60% of registered voters, was the highest since the first post-independence elections 20 years ago. Only 305 foreign observers were allowed to cover some 4 000 polling locations, and only 4 000 local observers were accredited of the 24 000 who applied, and that at the very last moment. This left the way open to massive electoral fraud, especially in more remote areas.

Under these conditions, to say the results were a surprise to most analysts is to make an understatement of massive proportions. They also evidently caused substantial embarrassment to the Central Intelligence Organisation, whose senior ranks had been doctoring the reports they were receiving from the field, in order to present more acceptable news to the presidency. Of the 120 seats contested, the MDC secured 57, the ZANU-Ndonga one and the ruling ZANU-PF 62. In terms of the popular vote as reflected in the official results, the MDC failed by the narrowest of margins to secure a majority, which is significant especially in terms of the presidential elections due in less than two years time.

The distribution of MDC victories is also informative. In the capital, Harare, all 19 seats went to the opposition, which secured majorities ranging from 66.9% to 82.1%. In Bulawayo, the pattern was repeated in even more exaggerated fashion: all eight seats fell to the MDC, by majorities of between 75.6% and 86.8%. Here one of the more notable casualties was the Minister of Home Affairs, Dumiso Dabengwa, who lost to the MDC's Gibson Sibanda by more than 16 000 votes. The rout was repeated in Matebeleland North, where all seven constituencies voted MDC, and ZANU-PF managed to secure only two of the eight constituencies in Matebeleland South. In Manicaland the MDC took seven seats, ZANU-PF six and ZANU-Ndonga one.

For its part, ZANU-PF made a clean sweep of Mashonaland Central, generally with impressive majorities: in Mashonaland East, ZANU-PF took 11 seats to the MDC's one; and in Mashonaland West, 10 to the MDC's two. In Masvingo, ZANU-PF secured 12 seats to the MDC's two, and in Midlands, 11 to the MDC's five.

As will be readily grasped, the regional dimensions of the results are extremely significant. The MDC secured all the seats in the country's two major cities, besides scoring well in other urban constituencies. It also virtually swept the board in Matebeleland, suggesting, indeed, that the Unity Accord between ZAPU and ZANU had died with Joshua Nkomo, and that the Ndebele and Kalanga were no longer willing to tolerate their implied second-class status.

The major significance of the MDC's gains in its maiden parliamentary challenge has been that even with the 30 nominated seats in the virtual gift of the President, ZANU-PF now lacks the two-thirds majority it once enjoyed, which would be necessary to force constitutional change unilaterally through parliament.

The MDC has also since launched court challenges to the results in 37 constituencies on various grounds, including violence and intimidation to influence voting, irregularities in the counting of ballots, people being turned away from polling stations and missing voters' rolls.

In addition, the sudden death of the victorious ZANU-PF candidate in Marondera West has opened the way to an early by-election, something ZANU-PF would have hoped to avoid at this stage.

This said, the MDC's parliamentary successes may have created a false sense of optimism among its supporters. It must be remembered that the MDC has as yet no track record in the legislature, its MPs are inexperienced for the most part, and it represents an extremely wide range of opinion and policy positions, some of which are essentially irreconcilable in terms of economic philosophy. It is fairly apparent that when people voted for the MDC, they probably did so less out of commitment to the party *per se*, than out of a profound desire for change and an end to Mugabe's rule, which will have to be borne in mind as the MDC proceeds.

It also has to be remembered that barring a regime change or amendments to the constitution, the parliament remains a talking shop. Policy is made by the President and his hand-picked politburo and is then ratified by the ZANU-PF central committee. For the first time, of course, there is now a sizeable opposition voice able to ask awkward questions of ZANU-PF MPs, and the house becomes a place for actual debate, where policies have to be defended in the public arena. Overall, however, the exercise has proven less satisfying than may have been anticipated, and some of the exchanges during the six week parliamentary session have been less than dignified. The MDC and its supporters have realised how little real power and influence they have gained for all the popular support they enjoy, though questions about the beneficiaries of the Congo intervention shed some light hitherto denied the Zimbabwean public. This realisation has led to a measure of disillusionment among the party faithful and the electorate at large. The MDC has also been marginalised in terms of the four parliamentary committees they chair, none of which is strategically placed to monitor government expenditure effectively.

Faced with their frustrated impotence in the legislature, the MDC and its trade union allies will be tempted to bring extraparliamentary pressures to bear, as they have done in the past. Unless carefully handled and thoroughly debated, this strategy is almost bound to cause disquiet among the economically more conservative supporters of the party.

The government's heavy-handedness with regard to the MDC may well prove to be a saving grace in terms of its public recognition of the opposition party's latent potency. It does, however, have the effect of diminishing the chances of establishing some form of co-operation between the MDC and the ZANU-PF's reformist wing, in any event a difficult task given the internal diffusion of opinion in both camps. Also, by attempting to demonise the MDC, depicting it as essentially subversive and a tool of foreign and white interests, the government may be preparing the way for the truly dangerous step of proscription or intimidating its leaders into exile. This would relate to the well-founded fear that an MDC candidate must enjoy a better than even chance of securing the presidency in 2002, especially if the ZANU-PF candidate is the present incumbent. By way of further insurance, the government is reported to be establishing a crack unit within the ZRP, currently receiving paramilitary training at Morris Depot, ostensibly to handle incidents of public disorder.

That the current, crude harassment of the MDC by the police adds further damage to the country's international reputation seems to be of secondary importance, if that.

President Mugabe's appointment of his new cabinet was an event awaited with some interest. It was obvious that many of the old guard would be replaced, some of them having lost their seats. The two vice-presidents were retained: Simon Muzenda, aged 77, and 76 year-old Joseph Msika, signalling that Mugabe was unlikely to step down on grounds of age. There were a number of new faces brought into a cabinet reduced in size compared with its gargantuan predecessor. The most important of these was Simba Makoni, a 50-year old businessman with a doctorate in Chemistry, who had served as a minister and deputy minister in Mugabe's first administration, before moving to the Southern African Development Community (SADC), where he held the post of Executive Secretary, and made excellent contacts with international bankers and funding agencies. Returning to Zimbabwe in 1994, he became managing director of the state-owned Zimbabwe Newspapers, only to be forced into the political wilderness following a disastrous clash with one of his editors, who proved to have more clout at the top. Makoni's appointment as Minister of Finance was well received in many quarters eager to believe that the political and economic climate might be about to change. There were even those, possibly including Makoni himself, who believed that this signified nothing less than Mugabe's anointing of his chosen successor.

Makoni's initial promises of financial rectitude and a return to sober economics as implied in the gloriously named *Zimbabwe Millennium Economic Recovery Programme*, currently undergoing its sixth revision, were taken as a sign that he had been given the free hand he had evidently required as a condition for accepting the job. The Programme, as yet unpublished and not approved by cabinet, contains ten objectives, to be achieved in the space of 18 months:

- consolidation of fiscal policy;
- the acceleration and completion of public enterprise reform;
- stabilisation of prices at lower levels;
- lower interest rates;
- the stabilisation of the value of the Zimbabwe dollar and resolution of the foreign exchange crisis;
- deepening of financial sector reforms;
- stimulating the growth of the productive sector;
- building confidence;
- protecting vulnerable social groups; and
- the establishment of implementation, accountability and monitoring institutions.

On 1 August, in an early indication of his determination to address the fundamentals, Makoni announced a 24% devaluation of the Zimbabwe dollar against its US counterpart, taking it down from its pegged level of 38:1 to 50:1. This came only hours after the President had announced that Zimbabwe would not be dictated to by donors and had no need of their support. Economists, though welcoming Makoni's move, suggested that it came too late, and that unless the new minister were to be given full rein over all policies touching upon Zimbabwe's economic recovery, the country's downward slide would continue.

Already in his first address to parliament on 3 August, Dr Makoni must have wondered whether he had been awarded the 2002 winner's trophy or the proverbial poisoned chalice. It transpired that all government departments had spent their budgetary allocations within the first nine months of the financial year, and that a supplementary budget would have to be passed. In addition, the assumptions upon which the October budget had been based had been so wildly inaccurate that survival would have been a more appropriate term than the recovery indicated in the title of the millennium programme.

	October 1999 budget	Dr Makoni's statement 3 August 2000
Total revenues	Z$87.2 billion	Z$96.3 billion
Total expenditures	Z$98.7 billion	Z$141.9 billion
Deficit as % of GDP	3.8%	14.9%
Average annual inflation	35%	59%

Worse still, on the same day, as if in an effort calculated to undermine the finance minister's efforts completely, President Mugabe announced that far from issuing orders to remove the 'war veterans' from farms they had occupied during the election campaign, he intended to acquire some 3 000 commercial farms for resettlement. This was a contradiction of undertakings to remove the veterans he appeared to have made to President Mbeki at a news conference the previous day.

By the time the supplementary budget was presented to parliament on 7 September, the picture was looking even worse. Makoni said that the country's acute shortage of foreign currency had resulted in the accumulation of arrears in servicing foreign debt of some US $154 million by mid-August. He blamed an unbudgeted 182% salary increase for ministers and parliamentarians in 1999 and a 69-90% wage hike for civil servants for unbudgeted expenditure of Z$422.8 million, and revised the budget deficit to 16.9% of GDP. Since most of this extra money would have to be borrowed on the domestic market, the annual interest bill would rise to some Z$27.2 billion, which, according to economists outside the government, would push the deficit to some 24% of GDP.

As Tony Hawkins pointed out, under the present regime, and given its commitment to radical changes in the agricultural sector. among other policies, Makoni has no room for manoeuvre. As he himself admitted to parliament, probably to the President's discomfort, the Congo war has already cost some US $200 million in foreign exchange, equivalent to 12% of tax revenue. (Some analysts maintain that even this figure is a vast underestimate and place the actual figure at US $500 million.) The government's domestic debt stands at about Z$120 billion (up from Z$78 billion at the beginning of the year), and interest rates hover between 60 and 70%. Interest charges therefore absorb 55% of revenue, and civil service salaries another 55%. As Hawkins rightly pointed out, a country where the government spends 23% more than its total revenue is headed not for a hard, but for a crash landing. Unable to afford salaries, and barring a radical reduction in civil service posts, the government simply has to print money, pushing the growth of the money supply out beyond its current annual 40%. GDP this year is already expected to contract by 10%.

It is in this context that the position of the IMF has to be considered, whose mission to Zimbabwe spent three weeks going over the political and economic situation, before deciding that talks would have to be resumed no sooner than next June. The mission urged the Zimbabwean government to pass a budget that includes a substantial reduction in the deficit, while protecting social programmes. It also noted that a restoration of economic stability would require issues of governance to be addressed to rebuild investor confidence, and the normalisation of relations with international creditors. It therefore called for land reform to be approached in an orderly and transparent manner, to win domestic and international support and minimise the potential for heavy losses in output, exports and employment.

Dr Makoni has his work cut out as he prepares the budget for October 2000. Looking at the figures, it seems evident that the IMF is saying that, unless certain key policies change, which they will not unless their is a change in the leadership, Zimbabwe will have to do without external financial assistance. This is a view shared by the MDC.

At the heart of the problem lies, first, the obtuse commitment to propping up Kabila's ungrateful regime, a commitment made probably as much out of Mugabe's determination to resist the incipient South African challenge to his moral leadership of SADC, as to the pecuniary and business benefits that were mistakenly expected. Second, the adoption of a programme calculated to destroy not only the commercial farming sector, but all the ancillary services connected with it also plays a role.

The fast track land resettlement programme aims to place 150 000 families on 5 million hectares of land within two months in time for the rainy season. Many of the 2 000 farms to be seized are very productive, and it remains to be seen how peasant farmers, without infrastructure, access to credit, extension support or marketing facilities will cope. In addition, no provision appears to have been made for the 40% of black farm workers who will find themselves unemployed.

In an important address to the Zimbabwe Institute of Directors early in September, John Robertson tried to alert the Zimbabwean public and international opinion makers to the desperate nature of the threat facing his country. The fast track to resettlement, he argued, was actually a fast track to impoverishment and disaster. The invalidation of property rights would undercut any confidence among investors. In 2000, he pointed out, commercial farmers would produce some Z$45 billion worth of produce with Z$40 billion for export. They employ some 335 000 people and pay wages of Z$5 billion a year. This creates an important local market, and also provides the foreign exchange vital to other parts of the economy, creating perhaps another 100 000 jobs. Commercial farmers also purchase some Z$35 billion of inputs per year, sustaining even more businesses and jobs. Some of these companies, which would go bankrupt without their sales to domestic commercial farmers also produce for export. The crops and livestock produced by commercial farmers are themselves inputs for processing industries, most of which could not continue without domestic inputs. Banks, financial institutions, insurance companies and commodity brokers and engineers of all sorts count commercial farmers among their most important clients. At all levels of this complex chain, goods and services are being created, salaries and taxes paid. With the decimation of the commercial farming sector, unemployment would be created on an unimaginable scale, the tax base, already inadequate, would shrink further and foreign exchange would become even scarcer. With the inevitable decline in welfare and service provision, those who could, would leave, shrinking the commercial sector into virtual non-existence. Already, it is noticeable that, of those attending the seminars offered on emigration, more than half are black. Almost everyone young enough and skilled enough to take the step is considering the prospect of seeking a life elsewhere.

In the meantime, any untoward natural catastrophe, such as drought would lead to mass starvation, and dependence on aid agencies whose history suggests that too little would arrive too late.

On this analysis, a fairly imminent shrinkage of the national economy, perhaps ultimately to about a half its current size should be considered. Since some 80% of Zimbabweans are already living in conditions of poverty, the desperate means to which the rest will have recourse can only be imagined. Nor is this the unhappy music of the far distant future. Many commercial farmers are no longer able to obtain the credit necessary to plant next year's crop. The banks are already dangerously over-exposed in terms of farm mortgages and have no desire to throw good money after bad. All the evidence suggests a far reduced planting of maize, wheat and tobacco, with dire consequences for the availability of foreign exchange, and thus fuel and other vital imports. Further depreciation of the currency can and probably will be undertaken, but how much this can continue before hyperinflation, already at some 70%, gets completely out of hand can only be surmised.

Unless someone can persuade President Mugabe that his land reform programme, however vital he perceives it to his personal political future, presages nothing but catastrophe for his country as a whole, the region is about to be shaken by a man-made catastrophe of epic proportions. Admittedly, there is little in the President's behaviour to suggest that he is amenable to rational argument on the subject. His world view of conspiracies and colonial evils as the fount of all Zimbabwe's ills as revealed by his diatribes in New York; his alienation of powerful and influential donors at a time when his economy desperately needs an immediate injection of US $800 million; and his apparent acceptance of the myth of Bantu/Tutsi rivalry as a root cause of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo all indicate a character virtually immune to reasoned persuasion.

As to his sense of personal responsibility, the opposition press was quick to seize on the news that when President Mugabe attended the United Nations Millennium Summit in New York, where he appealed for a cancellation of his country's debt, among others, he was accompanied by an entourage of 47, including his wife and their three children. This extravagance cost the hard-pressed Zimbabwean exchequer some Z$13 million.

Attention now shifts to the forthcoming special congress of ZANU-PF due for November or December 2000. As in the past, a great many expectations are being raised that this will mark the beginning of Mugabe's exit from power. Will he now concede that the central committee rather than himself, elects the politburo? Will individuals other than the head of the party be allowed to submit their names for the ZANU-PF's presidential candidacy? Is it true, as some newspaper reports allege, that members of the inner circle are now talking of the need for change at the top, or is this yet another method of raising expectations and drawing would-be contenders into exposing their positions prematurely? Will some constitutional compromise be floated that allows for the presidency to revert to a ceremonial position with some veto powers, and that responsibility for policy revert to a prime minister, as it did in the years following independence?

What is it that holds in thrall individuals within the party leadership who must realise that economic disaster will affect them in even greater measure than the ordinary Zimbabwean? The only reason that could be ascertained was the fear that, by demonstrating disloyalty now, they might expose themselves to a terrible retribution, perhaps in the form of sudden enquiries about their tax returns over the past 20 years, or investigations into corrupt practices, well known to the President but ignored until some opportune time. There have been recent examples of this, of the sacrifice of ministers and longstanding henchmen, *pour encourager les autres*.

There may be some among them who take heart from rumours that the President's health is weakening, even that he has suffered a minor stroke. "Caesar though art mortal," as Ken Owen wrote of P W Botha before the latter's infirmity gave his colleagues the courage to rise against him even as he chastised them for cowardice and faint-heartedness in the face of a future they all knew to be impossible to attain. Is that what will happen? It is not the most unlikely scenario.

What is absolutely clear is that, barring a party revolt of unimaginable proportions, those who place their hopes on the 'technocrats' of the new crew being able to persuade the captain to alter course away from the rocks towards which the SS Zimbabwe is so clearly headed, are underestimating both the lateness of the hour and the influence of the new officers, none of whom has an independent political support base.

Within the old guard of ZANU-PF, there are a few voices being raised in alarm. It has even been voiced by a senior ZANU-PF politician in parliament. On 12 September, Eddison Zvobgo, a man who himself harbours presidential ambitions, said:

> "We have tainted what was a glorious revolution, reducing it to some agrarian racist enterprise .... We have behaved as if the world owes us a living. It does not..... We have blamed other people for each and every ill that befell us .... As every peasant, worker, businessman or woman now stares at the precipice of doom, let us wake up and draw back. We must clear the slate, bury everything that has divided us and begin again."