

Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe: Exploring Future Prospects

Written by Felix Felisizwe Silundika and Hany Besada

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FELIX FELISIZWE SILUNDIKA AND HANY BESADA, APR 14 2012

The answer to the question of what to expect in Zimbabwe's turbulent political life in the year 2012 will depend entirely on to whom it is posed. There continues to be an expectation that a push towards general elections will occur in the coming year.

On the one hand there is Robert Mugabe, now 88 years old and the only president Zimbabwe has ever known since independence from Britain in 1980. He is also the presidential candidate of his ruling ZANU PF party in anticipated future elections which must be held sometime before mid-year 2013, according to a power-sharing arrangement with opposition groups. Mugabe has made no secret of his intention to do everything possible to call for an early election, forcing a vote before the possible implementation of a new state constitution which might curtail his increasingly authoritarian rule.

On the other hand, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which now share power following the 'Global Political Agreement,' (GPA), appear to have pinned all their hopes for a meaningful political solution on a continuing regional mediation process that could eventually lead to a democratically-established government. The GPA was conceived after Zimbabwe's violent presidential and parliamentary elections of 2008, which failed to produce an outright winner and resulted in a runoff voting process. The opposition candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai, refused to take part in the elections, citing the significant violence that was unleashed on his supporters, which would inadvertently hand Mugabe the presidency.

In parliament, while opposition members hold the majority of seats, Mugabe and his party continue to set the pace of political debate. Interestingly, despite Mugabe's dominance of the political landscape, the power-sharing arrangement with the MDC has arguably borne some fruit. There is now relative calm in the country as well as much needed stability, allowing some commerce to take place once again. Additionally, food shortages are no longer evident, which is in sharp contrast to the years preceding the 2008 elections when the country experienced the highest rate of inflation ever recorded, subsequently leading to the demise of the Zimbabwean dollar.

Despite the positive aspects of MDC inclusion in government, Mugabe and his generals continue to treat the opposition with contempt. One such example is the refusal by police and military leaders to salute Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai, or accord him with the traditional respect that his office commands. This kind of behaviour has continued despite the disapproval of the South African Development Community (SADC), the regional body which brokered the current political deal in Zimbabwe.

The SADC is also tasked with the duty of mediating issues and negotiations between the two political parties in an effort to develop a roadmap towards free and democratic elections. The MDC appear to have pinned all their hopes on a meaningful outcome of the SADC mediation process, but it continues to be painstakingly slow for Zimbabwe's population, which is anxious to progress towards a brighter, democratic future. Meetings between the two parties have only produced a promise of more reunions with no clear indication of any positive forward movement. Under current conditions, free and fair elections in the country appear remote at best and would only serve to empower ZANU PF and Mugabe to begin yet another fraudulent voting process.

As the conditions for a free and democratic election remain elusive, there are five key developments and dynamics

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that are negatively impacting the previously-mentioned mediation process.

Firstly, there exists general frustration over the failure of SADC regional leaders to reign in Mugabe and his generals. The mediation process, which was set up to draft a roadmap and create conditions for a free and fair election in Zimbabwe, has continued for far longer than expected. Further, it has not produced any tangible results except for empty verbal pronouncements, making it appear as if the regional body has not yet found an effective formula for dealing with President Mugabe. This leader casts himself as a true African nationalist, owing this image to his, and ZANU PF's, participation in the 1970s guerilla war fought alongside Dr. Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) against Zimbabwe's former British colonial government.

With SADC member-states also having experienced colonial rule in their own countries, it is understandable that Mugabe's seemingly nationalistic narrative would resonate with the current crop of leaders in many parts of Africa. In contrast, the MDC have enjoyed the financial backing of Western powers, a fact that has been effectively utilized by President Mugabe to label opposition parties as puppets, earning some political capital which he is eager to spend. Due to historical injustices, African leaders tend to ally with those who espouse liberation philosophy rather than others who might appear to follow the doctrines of their former colonial masters. Therefore, any alliance with the former occupational powers could be understood as tantamount to the betrayal of the African continent.

A few state leaders have dared to openly disagree with Mugabe, but they constitute an insignificant minority and stand little chance of making any meaningful impact on Zimbabwe's political future. Ian Khama of Botswana is one good example of someone on record as having publicly spoken out against Mugabe's dictatorial tendencies. However, Mugabe's success in steering Western countries well away from Zimbabwean politics, first by leaving the British Commonwealth group and by driving a wedge between regional African leaders, makes it difficult for other states to weigh in and provide advice and guidance. The Southern Africa Development Community may be best advised at this point to pay more attention to the plight of ordinary Zimbabweans rather than this authoritarian leader.

Secondly, the fragmentation of the Movement for Democratic Change has further strengthened Mugabe and his ZANU PF party stalwarts. Political and, sometimes, tribal differences that have played out within the main opposition have relieved the pressure on, and provided breathing room for Mugabe. Additionally, while he has skillfully used ethnic differences to his favour, despite widespread knowledge of the loss of his own support base in the country, cracks in this strategy are beginning to show.

There are evident economic disparities in rural areas of the Northern and Southern regions, pointing to a bias in infrastructure development policies that have favored the majority Shona ethnic group. Minority groups – most notably the Ndebele, Kalanga, Xhosa, Venda, Ndau, Nambya and Tonga, who have traditionally supported the political opposition – have borne the brunt of Mugabe's oppressive tactics. However, in recent years, other Shona groups such as the Manica and the Karanga have also been targeted for marginalisation, particularly through a divide and rule policy which has long been the ZANU PF's secret to political success. More recently, the emergence of Morgan Tsvangirai (also from the majority Shona speaking ethnic groups) as a political leader has steadily diluted Mugabe's power base in the northern and eastern regions of Zimbabwe.

Unfortunately even with ZANU PF's weakened political support, it continues to retain the ability to orchestrate violence. Its remaining support consists of hardliners who are likely to force their party to take a less conciliatory approach in dealing with the opposition. The fragmentation of the opposition has also been aggravated by infiltration of Mugabe's feared spy agency, the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO). It has successfully reduced any political threat to Mugabe and will likely continue to do so as long as he maintains control. It is important to mention that, certainly, Mugabe has people who genuinely support him, in particular those who have engaged with his anti-colonial rhetoric. These individuals see him as the protector of Zimbabweans from the West's expansionist aspirations, while others may only support him out of fear brought on by years of intimidation and violence.

Perhaps, a free and fair election may continue to be the only true hope of measuring political support in Zimbabwe, but the current conditions in this state are not conducive for such an exercise.

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Thirdly, the death of General Solomon Mujuru in 2011, by fire at his farmhouse – which has yet to be fully explained – has left a political vacuum in ZANU PF which may have negative implications for Zimbabwe. Mujuru wielded significant power within the party and was thought to be a direct threat to Mugabe's rule, due to his more moderate views as well as his publicly-acknowledged preference for another leader. General Mujuru is rumoured to have been behind the former Minister of Finance, Simba Makoni's, presidential bid in 2008, clearly putting him squarely on a collision course with Mugabe. While he had long been retired at the time of his death, Mujuru still maintained influence over other military generals, a clout which originated in the days of his involvement in the liberation struggle as their guerilla commander. His death will likely make other generals take a hardened position in any negotiations.

It should be noted that some of these military leaders are thought to have been complicit in the 1980s genocidal operation against supporters of Dr. Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU, which was an attempt to completely eliminate the group under the guise of protecting the regions of Matabeleland and Midlands from armed bandits. In an operation code named 'Gukurahundi,' (A Shona word meaning the 'the early rain that washes away the chaff before the spring rain'), the Government deployed a North Korean-trained army, the Fifth Brigade, on Joshua Nkomo's power base, causing the deaths of more than 20,000 innocent people. Interestingly, the operation took place with British military advisers present in Zimbabwe at the time, but they and the rest of the international community turned a blind eye.

Following Mujuru's death, the remaining military leaders may perceive Mugabe's presidency as their only shield against prosecution by international human rights courts, a course of action exposed through democratic elections and return of the rule of law. They will do whatever is necessary to ensure that the outcome of any popular vote thus favours their leader, as clearly witnessed in the 2008 elections.

Fourthly, ZANU PF's endorsement of President Robert Mugabe in December 2011 as their party's presidential candidate drove the last nail in the coffin of any hope for a succession debate within this political group. This support is indicative of a general fear within the ruling party to challenge him, despite well-documented evidence that many in the party's elite are resentful of his rule. A considerable number of leaders within ZANU PF have publicly proclaimed their support for Mugabe while privately inferring a different position to foreign governments, as exposed by Wikileaks last year.^[1]

Finally, a decision taken in November 2011 by the World Diamond Council, and ratified by the Kimberly Process, to allow the country to sell its diamonds means Mugabe has the funds he needs to stay in power. With recent discoveries of diamond deposits in the eastern region of Manicaland, the stakes could not be higher. It is rumoured that only government-designated functionaries are allowed to operate mines, especially in the recently discovered diamond fields, giving the ruling party a much needed financial lifeline.

While there is no measurement for SADC regional leaders' forbearance, logical thinking would suggest that there may be a growing impatience over the Zimbabwe issue. Other equally pressing issues in the region, such as Madagascar, a member state which is also in a political transition, may soon take center stage in regional affairs. SADC should perhaps speed up the process and expect that the Zimbabwe talks produce results. A suggestion to end squabbling by political parties could be to expand the representation of groups involved in negotiations to include other emerging pro-democracy forces in the country, as well as civic, religious leaders, and tribal chiefs. The fragmented Movement for Democratic Change and ZANU PF alone cannot continue to claim to be the only legitimate representatives of the Zimbabwean people, particularly following the flawed 2008 elections, in which only a small percentage of eligible Zimbabwean voters actually cast their ballots.

It is certain, as well, that Zimbabwean generals will continue to stall any progress towards a constitutional referendum, particularly if the new document does not allow Mugabe to contest future elections. In the past, these individuals have openly declared that a victory by none other than their preferred candidate would not be acceptable. ZANU PF clearly has a monomaniacal belief that their state liberation credentials entitles their party to perennial rule and continued plunder of state resources, which has lately fallen under the guise of an ill-advised policy of 'indigenization.' Holding elections under the present conditions is meaningless, if the outcome is already predetermined.

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Therefore, it is fair to conclude that even the most positive change brought on by the Global Political Agreement Government will appear superficial unless all parties are work towards a permanent solution.

Simultaneous to issues of democratic reform, bickering and political instability have a considerable toll on the average Zimbabwean. The country's health services have all but fallen apart, while Zimbabwe's once-elaborate infrastructure is crumbling. Despite liberation rhetoric by Mugabe, thousands of men and women who did the actual fighting during the war continue to live in abject poverty, with most never having seen any fruit of their sacrifices while the regime's cohorts live in luxury. Some of these elites may not even have any liberation credentials at all.

It is estimated that over 4 million Zimbabweans have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, while others have emigrated to Europe, Australia and North America. Zimbabwe was once credited with having the highest literacy rate in the world, a quality making Diaspora-based Zimbabweans a highly sought-after labour force, particularly in burgeoning economies. The skills they possess could easily be tapped to develop their own country. Further, the violent seizures of white-owned land under the pretext of empowering landless Africans at the expense of European settlers in the early 2000s put a heavy dent on the state's food production. Black farm laborers were also systematically driven away and labeled as 'traitors', simply for having been employed by whites, with the real beneficiaries of this chaotic land grab being none other than members of the ruling elite.

Despite all the grim statistics, Zimbabweans may still find solace in the fact that their liberation from Mugabe may be over the horizon. However, they must first free themselves from the pressure of ethnic intolerance that has allowed elites to exploit it for political gain. The lessons learned from three decades of dictatorial rule must be utilized as an educational tool by Zimbabweans to chart a new course for the future. The panacea to Zimbabwe's political woes will be to overhaul of their system of strong central governance that has nurtured a dictatorship for over three decades.

The introduction of constitutional reforms to allow democratization and the transfer of power to the provinces and districts under a devolved form of governance can best address the country's future. Electoral laws must equally be reformed to introduce a system of proportional representation, in which no one will be left out of the political equation, as the current first-past-the-post system is largely responsible for the state's autocratic rule and subsequent marginalization of many groups. A Bill of Rights, as enshrined in the United Nations Charter, may also be pivotal in laying down the foundation of a democratic state.

Finally, Zimbabweans should pay close attention to emerging, pro-democracy forces in the country. With the re-emergence of ZAPU in Zimbabwe's political landscape, there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon that might signal a new beginning – one in which Zimbabweans have a realistic opportunity to reclaim their deferred dreams.

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