



“PALAVER FINISH!” - What next for Zimbabwe?

Report on the debate 'Elections in Zimbabwe: what next?' De Balie, Amsterdam, 20 March 2002

Disillusionment, laughter and divergent views about the way forward. All three were much in evidence on the evening of March 20, 2002, nine days after the last polls closed in Zimbabwe's presidential elections. The Economist probably put it best in its March 16 editorial: "In the end, the strangest fact about Zimbabwe's presidential election...was not that Robert Mugabe stole it, but that he went to such extraordinary lengths to do so. How much simpler would it have been to cancel it and declare himself president for life." The editorial and the following article note a contradiction in the Zimbabwe regime: it craves respectability and at the same time could not care less about such inconveniences as democracy and the rule of law. The March 18 discussion attempted to dissect the electoral process and forge a path towards dealing with the prolonged Mugabe rule it has produced. Invited guests were Timothy Kondo of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), Chenjerai Hove, celebrated writer and poet. They were later joined by Álvaro Pinto Scholtbach of the Dutch Labour Party and Peter Hermes, Director of the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa (NiZA), two of the organisers of the evening - the third one was the Dutch development organisation Hivos. Freelance journalist Marnix de Bruyne led the discussions.

Disillusionment, frequently coupled with danger, causes people to abandon their country. Hove explained this eloquently in his piece "Why I left my beloved Zimbabwe". Others take refuge in withdrawal. Take Edgar Tekere, for instance, a former firebrand liberation fighter and one of Zimbabwe's first opposition politicians. He feels remorse and shame when thinking back on what he has fought for and what it has become. He has effectively left public life. Hove was in danger in Zimbabwe, because president Mugabe and his cronies are afraid of his ideas - or any idea. He explained it thus: 'A writer deals with the constituency of the mind. Politicians deal with the constituency of figures. Now, if a writer starts to influence a reader, that reader may become a problem.' In other words, a reader who begins to think will diminish the politician's constituency of figures, and that makes the writer dangerous.

Election winning machine

It was clear from all the independent polls taken prior to the elections that president Mugabe had indeed lost his constituency. Yet he won in what must stand out as a case study in a controlled, doctored and rigged vote. If one considers Mugabe's ZANU (PF) party not as a political entity but as an election winning machine, then it has done its job excellently. But it did, of course, have nothing to do with the will of the people. One way of inspiring confidence in voters to freely express their will is by sending international observers. The European Union sent a group observers who stayed in Harare for a few days and were then withdrawn, ostensibly because the Zimbabwean government had extradited its leader, Pierre Schori. So-called "smart sanctions" followed shortly thereafter. 'It would not have made a great difference,' declared Anne-Marieke Steeman, one of the EU observers who were pulled out. 'The decision to impose sanctions was taken too late. Now it was perceived to be a result of the Schori affair.' Indeed, the EU was found fiddling while the Zimbabwean countryside was set ablaze. Amid much laughter, Hove exclaimed: 'The EU was not kicking the ball! But the ball was there! Mugabe and his friends are no fools - now they will hide the ball...'

Aad van der Meer observed the elections for the World Council of Churches. He recalled that there was a large NGO effort that was frustrated by the ZANU (PF) government every step of the way. 'We wanted to have 4000 local observers of the churches in place', Van der Meer explained. 'Only 105 were allowed plus the 58 that came from outside Zimbabwe. We made 25 teams and went to all the hot spots: Harare, Mashonaland East, Buhera in Manicaland, Matabeleland.' When asked if he had not been legitimizing a flawed process, Van der Meer said: 'The well-being of Zimbabweans does not depend on the presence of 150-odd observers. And we did come out with a critical report which said that the elections had not been free, fair, transparent and universal.' He added that many of the foreign observers who had been contributing to the report were from Africa and well experienced in this kind of work. Incidentally, the Commonwealth election observers reached similar conclusions when their findings were compiled. Their report helped sway the organisation towards Zimbabwe's suspension, now in effect.

'Voter education'

NiZA director Peter Hermes had gone to the rural areas and found a remarkably smooth operation in place there. 'There were hardly any queues on election day. There were more than 1000 mobile polling stations where no MDC or international observers were present. These polling stations were used to change the figures. If you compare the 2000 Parliamentary elections with the present figures, the changes are remarkable.' This compares with the enormous queues in the towns, particularly Harare where a tripartite vote had to be processed by a number of voting stations that had been cut in half. Kondo told the audience that he had waited for 10 hours, 'but I jumped the queue. My wife waited for 16 hours...' On March 26, MDC issued a report saying that it had found more than 185,000 votes missing while more than 246,000 "extra" votes had been cast. If these figures are correct they would completely explain the 426,000 vote margin by which Mugabe won. The MDC, meanwhile, has asked the authorities to explain the unusually high voter turnout in the rural areas and the unusually low turnout in urban areas.

De Bruyne asked Timothy Kondo whether Mugabe really needed all these tricks. Did he, in the terms of the Economist have to go to such extraordinary lengths to get his victory. 'Oh yes,' Kondo emphatically replied. 'He knew he had lost the support of the majority of the people.' Take the issue of Tsvagirai's treason case. 'People have dismissed these allegations as outright lies,' Kondo said. But what about the rural people? They only have radio. Kondo dismissed that too. 'Listen, this animal has been around for such a long time. Mugabe has accused Ian Smith, Ndabaningi Sithole, Bishop Muzorewa, Joshua Nkomo and plenty others of plotting to kill him. Nobody believes this any more.' It was an echo of a remark, once made by a local journalist in Zimbabwe who described the entire ZANU (PF) top brass as 'pathological liars'.

Hove is not so sure, though. He said: 'Even Mugabe himself knows that his rule is illegitimate. People were given "voter education" in the rural areas, in places like Zaka. They were told to vote ZANU (PF) - at gunpoint.' Has the MDC then underestimated the situation? Well, the jury is still out on this one. 'They were very surprised to get 57 seats in 2000,' said Hove. As a matter of fact, I had a bet with (information minister) Jonathan Moyo about this. He still owes me one thousand dollars...' (Hove did not say whether these were Zimbabwean or US dollars.) What united the people was their desire for change. As Hove put it: 'We have the highest numbers of PhD's in government of any country in the world. Now they have messed up. So the idea was: let's have someone without degrees...'

Charges of treason

A clever combination of intimidation, violence, deliberate displacements, consciously created voter registration problems, press gag laws and on the day of voting physical obstacles in opposition strongholds and, to be absolutely sure, massive vote rigging secured the desired victory. In the meantime, violence and intimidation have continued unabated in the wake of Mugabe's victory. There are daily reports of violent retributions carried out against suspected MDC supporters. Treason charges have now been brought against Morgan Tsvangirai, arising from a doctored video tape in which he is shown talking about the "elimination" of Mugabe. The army is present in the townships and the villages. Political murders have

continued and the reign of terror is continuing to add thousands more to the tens of thousands already displaced by the violence.

It looks like ZANU (PF) is hell-bent on destroying the opposition in whatever way it occurs. That means not only dealing with the MDC but also tackling the trade union movement. How are both related and where do they come from? Time for some history, provided by Kondo, who has been actively involved in both. 'ZCTU did not intend to form a political party. Where it all started was with its criticism of the Economic Structural Adjustment Program, ESAP, in 1991. The main problem was that government had not dared to consult the workers and society at large about the introduction of this program. We concluded that ESAP was not going to improve the economy and from that moment onwards ZCTU was declared an enemy of the government and the party (ZANU).'

Thoughts of an opposition party were virtually non-existent; Morgan Tsvangirai was Secretary-General of the ZCTU which in 1995 proceeded to publish a report called "Beyond ESAP". Kondo: 'Again, the government refused to listen. We organised a Working People Convention in 1999 and it was at that meeting that we resolved that the best option would be to create a mass movement, in order to replace ZANU (PF).'

The rest, as they say, is history. But history has a tendency to be falsified, which is why all the details were meticulously written down and published in a book that must be very popular with the police and the security forces because it reads like a virtually complete "Who to Arrest" manual. Kondo, however, has no regrets. 'It must be clear who were involved.' One only has to look at the never-ending machinations around the declaration of National Heroes by ZANU (PF) - the abominable Chenjerai "Hitler" Hunzvi is buried at the national shrine, Heroes' Acre - to understand why Kondo attaches such great importance to recording history accurately and on the spot.

'The flowers of our memory'

And how will history continue? In other words, where do we go from here? That was the issue to hand after the break. But first Chenjerai Hove had a few lines to sum up the kind of history we are dealing with:

'In your time
You took away the flowers of our freedom.
In your time
The weak defended the (****).
And the land cried in your time.
The moon too was red.
It was dark in your time.
You took away the flowers of our memory.'

There is always an inside and an outside to the question how to change an undesirable government. Let's start with the external forces. The evening took place within 24 hours of the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth. Pinto Scholtbach pointed out that the EU had also put targeted sanctions in place (even though other participants had questioned their timing and possible effect). 'The next step,' Pinto Scholtbach argued, 'is to get the EU, UN and USA to negotiate with the Southern African Development Community. The idea is to make sure that it is impressed upon presidents Mbeki and Obasanjo that Zimbabwe is a test case for democracy in Africa. After all, we have the instruments, like the proposed cooperation on Nepad (the New Partnership for African Development). Our message: if you want support for that project you will have to commit yourself to the consolidation of democracy in Africa.'

Hove thought all of this was too little too late. He had said earlier: 'The EU should have been more vicious in its criticism. We are simply dealing with a dictatorial situation. It's outdated!' That should put paid to the European guilt trip that appears to have ensured that the gloves stayed on for so long. Mugabe has played this card masterfully.

The idea appears to be to engage the Mugabe government. This raises the issue of reliability. Mugabe is known not to respect any agreement he puts his signature to. So is more pressure the answer? Kondo thinks so. 'The international community must tighten the smart sanctions and put in place a UN Commission in order to get Zimbabwe to re-run the election.'

Hermes is less sanguine. 'The world will not act fast and decisively. But we should apply pressure where it is required. The international trade union movement must declare its solidarity with the ZCTU and political parties must do the same for the MDC. Both are at risk at the moment.' He thinks that isolation is not (yet) in order. That is not the stance taken by Denmark which has announced the closure of its Embassy in Harare.

Should the Netherlands do the same? Hermes: 'It would be too early. After all, it is the task of the international community to help people who are in trouble.' He added a political rider for domestic use that was applauded by the public but not further worked out: 'And we must allow people from Zimbabwe entry into Holland and other EU countries without too many problems.'

Zimbabwe needs help

In the short run, Zimbabwe needs help and the most urgent issue, finally admitted even by its own government, is the food situation. Harvesting will not begin before April and because of adverse weather conditions the yields will not be sufficient. Add to that the chaotic situation in most of Zimbabwe's commercial farmlands and you have a potential disaster on your hands. The country will need large amounts of food aid and no-one in the panel could stomach the prospect of a cut-off.

Kondo: 'Stopping food aid will add insult to injury. I support the idea that development nations should help Zimbabwe with food aid. We have civic organisations that are more accountable than government.' Disconcerting was the announcement by Hermes, a little later, that apparently the government of Zimbabwe is preparing legislation banning NGOs from being involved in the distribution of food aid, which would mean a continuation of food being used as a political weapon. As yet, there has been no confirmation that this will indeed happen. Hermes also insisted that food aid must continue to be given.

But at the end of the day, the people decide. They have been swindled out of their options this time around but what is the way forward for them, in the country? Hove vehemently disagreed with the idea of a Government of National Unity (GNU). 'Mugabe has this capacity to use you and then discard you, like a snake uses and then discards its skin. He has a history of swallowing other parties. If Tsvangirai allows himself and the MDC to be swallowed, it will be the end of democracy. Mugabe is not willing to share power with anybody.'

When looking for an example, the best one is the famous 1987 "Unity Accord" that put an end to the civil war that was threatening to tear the country apart (certainly after the vicious campaign of the notorious Five Brigade against the Matabele people). This was, as many have argued, in effect, ZANU (PF) eating Joshua Nkomo's competing ZAPU party. A GNU under the current circumstances, Hove and Kondo argued, would be a repetition of this experience.

Kondo: 'Talking about a government of national unity is like negotiating at gunpoint. If there was a sense of dialogue, then ZANU should withdraw the charges of treason against Tsvangirai as a first gesture.' There is no evidence that this is likely to occur. The question whether or not it would be a good idea to have a GNU only to organise fresh election was not conclusively settled. And there is, in fact, a stalemate: Tsvangirai refuses to endorse the election results and Mugabe says he will only talk about a GNU if the MDC accepts the results. In short: a Catch-22.

Then, what? The unions have been weakened. Their membership has been diminishing as a result of retrenchments and closures of factories etc. Thanks to the economic antics of the Mugabe government Zimbabwe is de-industrialising at a rate that matches post Cold War Russia under Yeltsin. In spite of Kondo's statement that the national strike - which on March 16 was in its first day - would be a success, it

failed. And Mugabe has announced the “de-recognition” of the ZCTU, a move whose practical consequences are difficult to gauge.

The land issue

‘You have been talking all night but we have not heard anything about the land,’ the panel was rebuked by a member of the public. At last: the land! How important is the land? Kondo gave his second history lesson of the evening: ‘The land issue was one issue of the Liberation Struggle. Paramount was self-governance! We all know that the colonial government was racist in every respect. Now, when we got our Independence, land distribution was carried out until 1984. Only 60,000 families were resettled. The issue was left lying by the government and when asked about this they always came with the same justification (and indeed this was its mantra for many years - BP): “Our hands are tied by the Lancaster House agreement.” In 1987 we changed our Constitution. And it was Nkomo who said that the issue of land will cause a revolution of we don’t address it. And he was right. But government has been sitting on the land issue for too long!’

‘Palaver Finish!’ was the final poem Hove read. Sometimes one just has to conclude that there is no more business to be done with an intransigent government. Sometimes, the powers that be close all avenues towards dialogue. Inside Zimbabwe, this appears to have occurred. It is not yet the case between Zimbabwe and the outside world. There were no conclusions at the end of the (highly enjoyable) Amsterdam palaver, save, perhaps, the rather lame notion that the outcome of all this is unclear, just like the way forward remains hidden from view, for the time being.

Bram Posthumus, journalist

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