



Situation Report

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Zimbabwe's Movement for Democratic Change: Briefing notes

Introduction

Since attaining its independence from Britain in 1980, Zimbabwe has been ruled by one party, the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), led by the president, Robert Mugabe. Even though this country is considered a *de jure* democracy, credible opposition to ZANU-PF did not begin to emerge until the early 1990s, in a context of growing poverty and unemployment.

The nationalist project represented by ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe has failed to provide the broad masses of its people with either human security or social peace. This deficiency is well treated by Patrick Bond and Masimba Manyanya in their most recent, comprehensive book, *Zimbabwe's plunge: Exhausted nationalism, neoliberalism, and the search for social justice*, in which they observe that two decades after independence, fatigue associated with the ruling ZANU-PF's misgovernment and economic mismanagement has clearly reached its nadir.² The fact that Zimbabwe has reached a breaking point is also implied by Amanda Hammar and Brian Raftopoulos in their recent publication, *Unfinished business: Rethinking land, state and citizenship in Zimbabwe*. These authors note that the dramatic changes in Zimbabwe's economic, political and social landscape since early 2000 have come to be known as the "Zimbabwe Crisis".³ The steady decline in living standards throughout the 1990s is identified generally as one of the main reasons for the growing dissatisfaction with the government that in September 1999 galvanised civic groups and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) into forming a political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), currently led by Morgan Tsvangirai.

Merely one year after its formation, the MDC won 57 seats in the 2000 parliamentary election, compared with the 62 seats won by ZANU-PF. Interest in the elections was strong in the urban areas, while intimidation probably reduced participation in some rural areas. The most striking feature of the voting pattern was not the overwhelming support for MDC in the cities, but that ZANU-PF won only two seats in the Matebeleland provinces. Furthermore, the MDC won seven seats against ZANU-PF's six in Manicaland. Matebeleland and Manicaland, which have occasionally been the strongholds of opposition parties, voted for the same opposition party for the first time. This must have been alarming to ZANU-PF, with its rhetoric

of unity and the regional balancing of power among its leadership. This electoral outcome made the MDC Zimbabwe's most successful opposition party in the country's independent history.⁴

What follows is an attempt to analyse the MDC's progress as a political party despite the huge political challenges it has had to face from the governing ZANU-PF party, which has made concerted efforts, legal and illegal, to undermine support for the MDC. This short analysis is carried out in the hope that it may clarify the party's ideology, its composition and its future challenges. The author hopes it will also suggest what role the MDC can play in resolving the multifaceted crisis that Zimbabwe must, as a matter of urgency, overcome.

Introduction

The MDC is a relatively new political party, which draws its support largely from the new generation of Zimbabweans whose political ideology has been shaped more by the experience of twenty years of ZANU-PF rule than by the liberation war. It can be argued that the MDC came into being because the unifying vision of the liberation struggle had broken down, and the "democratic deficit" and the failing economic environment had emerged as major challenges to the actual experience of liberation. Discontent with the policies of the governing party had been preceded by the gradual evolution of the economic crisis. This discontent has now been expressed through a mass mobilisation for constitutional reform that has brought together various professional and civic interest groups.⁵

Opposition as a response to political and economic decline

As a political party, the MDC was created by a coalition of civic groups that were united more by distaste for Mugabe and ZANU-PF than by any unity of political programmes. Its origins may be located primarily in ZANU-PF's adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1991.⁶ ESAP had a disastrous impact on living conditions. Indigenous industries built up behind protective barriers were devastated by cheap imports, and unemployment soared. The poor were hit by rampant inflation and, at the same time, had to contend with new charges levied for health and education services. The efforts of newly independent trade unions and new civil society organisations to engage with ZANU-PF over these issues were rebutted by a regime that was becoming increasingly authoritarian. A series of strikes in the period 1996 to 1998, particularly in the public sector, forced Mugabe to concede wage increases. This set the leadership of ZCTU on a collision course with the political elite within ZANU-PF. So deep was the resentment of the unions' collective action that the state daily paper, *The Herald*, habitually referred to labour leaders as "stooges of white imperial interests".⁷ What these developments actually demonstrated was that strategic mass action could triumph against state repression and intransigence. Peasants subsequently also expressed their frustration through spontaneous land invasions, and liberation war veterans demanded compensation for their sacrifices during the fight for independence.

The MDC has achieved much in its short history. In the face of state-organised violence, the party has seriously threatened the ZANU-PF regime. It has built successfully on the struggles of the 1990s, uniting disparate social forces in their efforts to oust Mugabe. Its diffuseness has, however, made it a perfect target for the state media's accusations that it is little more than a vehicle for

foreign interests: the “white imperialists” determined to overthrow Mugabe’s “visionary rule” and frustrate his “revolutionary project”.

The dilemma of diffuseness

The government’s assault on malign foreign influences has been a particularly effective strategy since ZANU-PF’s controversial land reform programme came to dominate the political arena in Zimbabwe. The MDC has found itself in a quandary: how to question the motives for the policy and criticise its execution without being associated with the sectional interests of the white commercial farmers and their overseas sympathisers. Mugabe’s land “redistribution” took the MDC by surprise. Its response has been to call for a stakeholders’ conference to allocate land on an equitable basis, but this approach, eminently sensible in theory, has become increasingly abstract when, on the ground, occupied farms are being divided amongst (mostly) ZANU-PF supporters.⁸ Some believe the MDC has played into the hands of the white commercial farmers, allowing Mugabe to portray himself as the friend of the peasantry. Certainly, couching the debate in abstract and macroeconomic terms was hardly calculated to win support among the MDC’s grassroots following.

It has therefore become apparent that the MDC may struggle to keep these different social forces unified under its leadership, and that it may, in future, become divided on ideological grounds and fundamental differences in policy. Some observers point out that it was the MDC’s belief that the issues of ideology and participation would be negotiated once Mugabe’s regime had been dislodged from power.⁹ Even though the party has done much to avert clashes of interests between the moderates and the militants, the leftists and the conservatives, the young and the old within its ranks, the MDC has to define a new set of values (both inspirational and strategic) that will keep the bond intact before it is consumed by a “struggle within the struggle”.

Because the MDC was formed in a very inclusive and extensively consultative manner, there are many constituencies that have an interest in determining the course it will take in its path towards political transition. It was therefore inevitable, from the beginning, that these various constituencies would clash either on ideological lines or on policy. In fact, history teaches us that where there are several groups or even individuals engaged in a struggle against a common enemy, there is bound to be a power struggle among them at some point.¹⁰ The MDC is no exception to this principle of human and organisational dynamics.

Differences between militants and moderates

One view of the MDC’s current position is that it is divided, strategically and ideologically, into two broad constituencies which, for the purposes of this paper, are termed “militants” and “moderates”. This division can be traced to the period immediately after the MDC’s failure to oust the ruling party at the presidential polls in the March 2002 elections. The militants in the MDC advocated a strategy that would see the party spearheading a mass uprising against the ZANU-PF’s Mugabe-led regime. The argument in favour of this strategy was that it would either exert more political pressure for change on ZANU-PF than it could resist, or that this pressure would result in a radical regime change in favour of the opposition. The moderates, on the other hand, favoured a strategy of pushing for talks with the ZANU-PF that would, they

hoped, eventually lead to a negotiated settlement between the two principal parties and would usher in an end to the political impasse in Zimbabwe. This moderate perspective was based on the view that the Zimbabwe crisis is basically one of political illegitimacy. It is argued that once this key issue is addressed through negotiations, other factors relating to governance, economic reform and the humanitarian crisis will be resolved as the widening polarisation and tension between the MDC and the ZANU-PF are bridged. The MDC's parliamentary caucus has also encouraged participation by retaining their seats in parliament, claiming that as members of parliament they at least have been able to give voice to some opposition against government policy.

Because many constituencies within the party, particularly the militants, regard the MDC as the real winner of the 2000 and 2002 elections, the party has rejected the attempts of the leaders of neighbouring countries or the Commonwealth to facilitate negotiations with ZANU-PF. The militant wing regards participation in such negotiations as tantamount to recognising ZANU-PF's victory as legitimate. It is not, however, only the militants who view the governing party's overtures at reconciliation with suspicion: ZANU-PF's track record in this regard has been to find strategies to co-opt potential opposition rather than make any attempt to share power.¹¹

Leadership crisis

The ideological division within the MDC has been aggravated by the fact that there appears to be a crisis of leadership. This is exacerbated by the fact that Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the MDC, is facing treason charges that may be deterring him from taking the more militant view in favour of mass action. However, if the MDC leadership remains indecisive on this matter, it will lose street credibility among the masses as the crisis in Zimbabwe worsens. There is, moreover, a sense of frustration among MDC supporters that may fuel spontaneous, riotous conduct. This can only be averted if clear leadership is forthcoming from the top.¹²

The pressures, both internal and external, being brought to bear on the MDC have now raised the question of whether the MDC can continue to act as an effective umbrella body for the other civil society groups in Zimbabwe calling for democratic reform. The seeming lack of effective leadership and the growing fault lines within the MDC may engender damaging "struggles within the struggle". Political ambition may tempt certain members of the MDC to push personal agendas, so that when the opportune moment for political transition presents itself, these leaders will have positioned themselves strategically either to strike deals with the governing party or simply take power for themselves.¹³ This kind of manoeuvring is often prompted by defensive career positioning as individuals fear being marginalised in a new dispensation.

President Mugabe's rhetoric has displaced the crisis from the national to the regional level as a pan-African struggle against imperial domination, and to a great extent this has thwarted the MDC's regional diplomacy. There is thus a need for the MDC to rethink its regional strategy and refine its prescriptions for a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. In particular, the MDC needs clearly to articulate its position on the contentious issues of race, north-south relations, resource redistribution and the broader pan-African agenda. The simple question after the presidential poll has been, "What is the MDC's agenda now?" That agenda must be well articulated, well publicised and owned by the membership.

International and regional initiatives

Recent years have seen a flurry of diplomatic activity geared towards seeking a solution to the Zimbabwe crisis, particularly as leaders of the developed world have grown increasingly impatient with the pace of initiatives to resolve the crisis. This burgeoning impatience is reflected in an article published in the *New York Times* shortly before the visit to Africa of US President, George W Bush. It quoted US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, as saying of Mugabe and his regime that “their time has come and gone and that new leadership respectful of human rights was needed”.¹⁴

A variety of would-be interlocutors and mediators have proposed different ways of resolving the Zimbabwean crisis. Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo has called for Robert Mugabe’s retirement while at the same time pushing for the MDC to drop its legal petition against the result of the presidential election. Some observers suggested at the time, somewhat cynically, that this was no more than a veiled attempt to remove a source of embarrassment for the many African countries that had validated a palpably fraudulent election. There are also indications that the South African government, which plays the most important role in both the regional and international initiatives to solve the crisis, favours a government of national unity. On the other hand, the US and the EU have intensified the pressure with the personal sanctions that have been slapped on President Mugabe and members of ZANU-PF’s inner circle.¹⁵

South Africa’s “silent diplomacy”

The South African diplomatic position, described in media circles as “silent diplomacy”, has surprised many observers. Its obvious bias in favour of ZANU-PF is particularly unexpected given that there are more dissimilarities between ZANU-PF and the ANC than have been acknowledged. There may well be obvious reasons why an ANC-led South African government admires Mugabe’s courage in confronting the white settler community, but these do not translate into ideological or even methodological similarities. It follows, then, that if the claims of historical linkages and ideological similarities are unsustainable, the reason for South Africa’s silent diplomacy must lie elsewhere.¹⁶

Some point to the anger of the ANC at the MDC’s secret meeting with the Democratic Party during one of its earliest lobby visits to South Africa as the reason for the government’s decidedly lukewarm attitude towards the party. While that was undoubtedly a political blunder, it hardly suffices to explain why an entire nation is being held to ransom through this strategy of silent diplomacy. The issue is certainly more nuanced than is suggested by the simplistic explanations we have heard over the last three years.

Pretoria’s position on Zimbabwe, in particular its approach to the MDC, has nothing to do with a deficiency of facts or intelligence. What is more likely is that Pretoria may deliberately be ignoring facts—in much the way it has in the AIDS debate—for some other political reason. Whatever the case may be, Pretoria’s position is totally out of sync with rational economic considerations. This has led to growing mistrust of the South African government by the MDC, which claims that the former is not acting in good faith. Given the seeming intransigence and lack of *bona fides* on the part of the South Africa government, the MDC will have to intensify its diplomatic efforts in the region in the hope of finding other political actors who may act as mediators in future negotiations with ZANU-PF, while at the same time attempting to mend fences with an ANC-led government in South Africa.

Pre-election dynamics in Zimbabwe

As ZANU-PF moves into election mode, well ahead of the parliamentary contest due to take place in March 2005, the MDC leadership finds itself assailed on all sides by the state. The party is also caught up in an ideological debate on whether or not it should participate in next year's parliamentary elections, given Zimbabwe's uneven political landscape, which is skewed to the distinct advantage of the governing party. Draconian legislation wielded by a co-opted police force and a coerced or suborned judiciary allows little room for the MDC to rally the forces of popular dissatisfaction. Beyond that, ZANU-PF militias will ensure that the electoral competition is neither free nor fair.

In these circumstances, the MDC's immediate future seems unpromising, unless new, untried initiatives and tactics are attempted. ZANU-PF, for all its dominance, has never been a monolith. As the economic crisis deepens and begins to threaten the clientelist networks essential to its cohesion, survivalist instincts can be expected to surface within the ruling oligarchy. The increasingly open debate about the post-Mugabe dispensation has shown clear signs of this. How long might it be before the victims on both sides of the political divide make common cause?

Unseating ZANU-PF

The challenges and threats of the period before the 2005 parliamentary elections make it even more imperative for the MDC to define a new set of inspirational and strategic values that will keep the coalition intact. There are evident cracks, with some sectors calling for mass uprising whilst others prescribe negotiations and international intervention.

Morgan Tsvangirai, as leader of the opposition, is in neither parliament nor government. In a sense many of the recognised activities of the MDC take place without his clear involvement. The dilemma is that there are situations where a parliamentary caucus agenda may be different from the broader party's position. Thus there have been instances where sentiments attributed to various pockets of the MDC leadership are contradictory. Cases in point are Eddie Cross's views on privatisation and Munyaradzi Gwisai's position on the land issue.

There is a possibility, as already mentioned, that factionalism within ZANU-PF could lead to its disintegration, and that this would create space for the MDC to take power. However, the weakness of the MDC—caused mainly by Mugabe's strategy of undermining civil society organisations opposed to his rule—has made this highly unlikely at this stage. Nevertheless, this young party has proved itself a worthy opponent of the governing party, which is increasingly looking like an organisation with no meaningful solutions to Zimbabwe's economic and political woes. Should the MDC consolidate its position and come up with new, innovative solutions, we might see the opposition unseating ZANU-PF from a position it has held for over two decades.

Recovery and reconstruction

The damage wrought by the last several years of politically motivated economic mismanagement will be difficult to redress. Whether the MDC's supporters have the stomach for the hardships involved in a recovery programme must be doubtful, particularly after what they have already

endured. This may well explain why the MDC's policies are articulated only in the broadest terms and specific measures are wanting.

Even if the MDC wins power, it will be faced with the enormous challenges of reconstructing the crumbling state apparatus and fostering increased development and democratisation in a country that has suffered from a deficit of both. The MDC is aware that it will have to deal with the IMF, but many of its working class supporters want to maintain subsidies and price controls in order to survive. They are also aware of the problems of Zambia, where a trade union-based party, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD), came to power and quickly fell prey to corruption, its ranks filled by opportunistic placemen from the former regime. Big cuts were accordingly made in the state safety net for workers and the poor. Certainly, the MDC in power may face resistance from parts of its civil society and trade unionist constituencies if it becomes too entangled with the forces of globalisation, especially the Bretton Woods institutions.

In short, the MDC must do all it can to minimise damage from the perils it must face in the struggle within, as it evolves into an even greater political force in Zimbabwe.

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