
The Role and Effectiveness of Opposition and Civil Society Groups in Zimbabwe

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Introduction

The following text provides a summary of a meeting, held at Chatham House on 6 July 2016, at which Tendai Biti, president of the People's Democratic Party, discussed the role of opposition and civil society groups in generating positive change in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's opposition has been in constant flux since the 2013 elections and the end of the government of national unity. New parties and alliances are emerging as elements of both ruling and opposition parties have splintered and reformed. The main challengers to the ruling ZANU-PF at the 2018 elections are yet to emerge, but as Zimbabwe tries to manage both economic crisis and political uncertainty, opposition and civil society voices will continue to play an essential role in determining the country's future.

Tendai Biti

The economy is going to be the primary driver of the immediate, short-term direction of Zimbabwe. An estimated 79 per cent of the population are living in extreme poverty, surviving on less than \$1.25 a day. In urban areas, people have resorted to 'tsaona' – surviving on five rand a day by buying a little of cup of sugar and a little cup of mealie-meal; just enough to get through the day. The staple food is traditionally maize, but in urban areas this is now rice because that is cheaper than mealie-meal. And so, in the townships, MPs are told: 'I need sadza; MP, will you please buy me just a plate of sadza for a dollar'. The current crisis is hitting the average person deep far deeper than during the 2008 economic collapse.

In 2008 there was a fallback in that people with access to a small amount of foreign currency were able to circumvent the collapsed Zimbabwean dollar: US \$50 or \$100 was enough to survive. Diaspora remittances allowed people to survive. Dollarization has taken this away.¹

The other survival mechanism was the ability to cross borders to trade. The government have cut this off through Statutory Instrument 64 of 2016, effectively imposing a structural ban on imports. In economics, tariffs are raised in order to control imports, but in Zimbabwe's case a statutory instrument has been adopted physically to prevent goods – including those that ordinary people survive on – entering the country.

Citizens are very angry. A 'stay-away' by workers on 6 July meant no economic activity in Harare, with schools, banks and shops all closed. The difference between this protest and actions previously organized by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) is that the event was spontaneous, rather than organized by a labour union or political party.

This means that whoever may be leading such action has the potential to incrementally raise the tempo. The same group of people behind the one-day stay-away may in a few months say: 'Let's go on the streets. It's not enough to hide in our homes and not go out. Let's go on the streets.' It's easier for a government with a very strong intelligence network to deal with activity organized through the labour unions or political parties. But this new kind of organization is invisible. A lot of it stems from creative young people on social media. Facebook is becoming a major instrument of the fight against the government, as it was in places like Tahrir Square; WhatsApp is also becoming a major tool of opposition. The incumbent regime doesn't understand this new fight, because while it has always understood the physical struggle it doesn't understand the intellectual counterpart.

¹ Zimbabwe adopted a multi-currency system in 2009, but of the 'basket' of permitted currencies, the US dollar is dominant by far.

Another driver of the country's future is the internal politics of ZANU-PF, and connected to this is the succession issue. The ruling party is divided. The leading camps are the one called Generation 40 (G40), led essentially by First Lady Grace Mugabe. These people didn't participate in the liberation movement, nor are they known for any progressive development agenda. By contrast, there is also the Lacoste faction, which supports Emmerson Mnangagwa. The latter can claim to have participated in the liberation movement, which confers social legitimacy, and this is why the majority of citizens back Mnangagwa. The Lacoste faction is developing an agenda that says: 'Let's forget about democracy. Africa doesn't do well with democracy. The democratic experiment is a failure on the African continent.'

There is a lot of anger between the factions, and verbal attacks can be personal. Mnangagwa is quiet but speaks through his proxies, such as Christopher Mutsvangwa, head of the War Veterans Association.

Regarding the constitutional position on succession, if the president retires or dies, the first vice-president will take over for 90 days. Each faction knows that being in power for those 90 days will be critical. There are two vice-presidents: Phelekezela Mphoko (second vice-president), associated with the G40 faction; and Emmerson Mnangagwa (first vice-president). But G40 has an advantage in that Grace Mugabe will likely be beside the president at the critical last moment.

The biggest threat is that there's no precedent for the orderly passing of the baton in ZANU-PF. There was a never a congress for Mugabe's takeover, and effectively there has only been one leader. ZANU-PF's constitution provides for the president to appoint the key positions such as members of the central committee and members of the political bureau. But it is weak on how the president is chosen, because as long as the president is alive he is the figurehead. There will be serious legal arguments in the ZANU-PF succession, and so the supreme court and chief justice could play a significant role in deciding the process. The party must nominate a new president to complete the term of the outgoing president within 90 days; but the constitution does not stipulate that there must be a congress, and so there will be different interpretations as to whether a congress is convened to choose the successor.

Also potentially important to the future direction of Zimbabwe's politics is the capacity for civil society and the opposition political parties to organize. Attempts have been made to form a grand coalition, but in an environment of mistrust the focus has been on finding the lowest common denominator – a formula that could lead to an electoral alliance or an electoral pact. But for the existing parties this has not been easy. There was a meeting in Pretoria with Joice Mujuru (founder of Zimbabwe People First – ZimPF); Tendai Biti has also been involved in the Coalition of Democrats (CODE) negotiations, featuring Simba Makoni's Mavambo Kusile Dawn (MKD), the MDC under Welshman Ncube, Elton Mangoma's Renewal Democrats of Zimbabwe (RDZ), Farai Mbirira's Zimbabweans United for Democracy (ZUNDE), and the Democratic Assembly for Restoration and Empowerment (DARE).

In the view of the speaker, ZimPF would be the easiest to build a coalition with; but Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC-T will be the 'elephant in the room'. A lot of positive things have been happening behind closed doors, with key figures much closer than they were. The dialogue is focused on issues rather than personalities. A simple 'sincerity test' has been introduced: are those coming to the table prepared to let the next president be somebody else? Not everyone can stand as the face of the opposition in 2018. At the moment, the choice is between Tsvangirai and Mujuru, with the latter currently having the upper hand.

There needs to be a pre-election agreement that centres on a programme of action for the post-election agenda. What is clear is that the 2018 elections will produce a transitional government. But things may happen before 2018 that would force ZANU-PF to go to an early election. There could be a national transitional authority manifested in two ways. A pre-2018 authority arising out of the departure of

President Mugabe. In such a scenario, any faction that emerges out of ZANU-PF will require more time to consolidate, and the economic situation will count against them. Whichever faction wins won't be able to go it alone, and there will be an appetite for negotiation.

In the post-Mugabe scenario, no one currently within ZANU-PF would, in the view of the speaker, be able to compete with Tsvangirai or Mujuru, let alone a combination of the two. ZANU-PF may seek to persuade Mujuru to return to the party because she still has the political support base. Mnangagwa is hampered by his association with Gukurahundi.² Zimbabweans will not allow a dynasty, which will limit Grace Mugabe's chances of succeeding her husband. Saviour Kasukuwere and Jonathan Moyo are also unlikely to win a poll.

Mujuru would potentially be popular at an intersection of nationalist and liberation elements. This is why an agreement between political parties on the post-election scenario is critical. There needs to be a national transitional agenda that maintains order, restores the social contract, brings economic reform and finishes the business of constitution-making, realigns laws to the new constitution, provides for electoral reform and institution-building, introduces the principle of devolution, covers security sector transformation, finalizes the land question, and bring about total re-engagement.

The army and the 'securocrats' will be critical. The latter in Zimbabwe are unique, and it is uncertain what role they can play in an election. They do not see distinction between the party interests and vital interests of the state. They are political, and thus there will need to be a dialogue with these interests. Security sector reform is critical, and this is why in the short term ZimPF is a critical interlocutor, because it has leverage over the security sector.

Summary of Q&A and discussion

The IMF and foreign governments should continue engaging with Zimbabwe, but the process must go beyond economic engagement and provide for the creation of a sustainable, democratic state. The regime is only interested in accessing more money, and this is where the IMF has leverage to encourage reform.

The government must prove that it can balance the budget before being offered IMF assistance. Wages are still not being paid, and this is particularly catastrophic at present since quarterly corporation taxes were payable in June. The government funded a 12 per cent budget deficit by issuing 'toxic' treasury bills. The cash shortage must also be resolved.

The IMF must also demand civil service reform. There are 550,000 civil servants, an increase from 236,000 before 2013, whose wages consume 91 per cent of total state expenditure. Many of these are 'ghost workers', whose positions were created for political reasons prior to the 2013 election. There are also hundreds of parastatals that are conduits for corruption.

The Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act must be repealed because it is of no benefit to Zimbabweans. Instead, a minerals and diamonds act must be passed to guarantee transparency in these industries.

² The term Gukurahundi is used in Zimbabwe to refer to a period of state-sponsored violence against civilians in the Matabeleland region between 1983 and 1987.

Zimbabwe has been deliberately avoiding taking part in the 2005 G8 debt relief initiative because of demands for economic responsibility, and instead has been borrowing heavily from other governments and banks, running up more and more debt. This approach is irresponsible and is not going to work.

When the MDC was formed in 1999, its members would speak at rallies about prosecuting ZANU-PF figures and demanding justice. It is now recognized that this was the wrong approach; a transition of power requires the consent of the ruling party and the security establishment. Following the elections in 2008, the military didn't trust the MDC not to prosecute them or take their funds, and therefore there was no transition of power. This time, according to the speaker, the MDC has held talks with military figures, and given them written guarantees that a transition of power would protect their interests; this is the smart approach to creating change in Zimbabwe.

The involvement of Joice Mujuru in opposition politics also offers guarantees to the securocrats, because she was previously part of the establishment.

Zimbabwe needs a period of national healing, and the restoration of the social contract during a transition of power. Mujuru is well suited to leading this. Even when she was part of ZANU-PF, opposition figures were able to go to her office and converse with her openly – something they have not been able to do with Emmerson Mnangagwa.

There are two preconditions for change in Zimbabwe: the opposition must be united as a broad front; and there must be electoral reform. A better electoral management system is crucial, as at present opposition parties have no access to the electoral roll, which is potentially a major instrument of fraud. In 2013 many voters who supposedly signed their name were actually illiterate, or simply didn't exist. There is no way of proving this alleged fraud without access to the electoral register. There must be strong and well-funded election observation from the international community.

The announced introduction of bond notes will be a disaster reminiscent of the 2008 hyperinflation crisis and the collapse of the Zimbabwean dollar.³ ZANU-PF's refusal to reach out to the West is akin to committing suicide; and while many people previously gave the Zimbabwean government the benefit of the doubt, that trust has dissipated and confidence is low. Zimbabwe's export economy relies on commodities for which demand cannot be boosted through using bond notes as export incentives. The US \$200 million bond note fund would be better used to incentivize businesses to remain in Zimbabwe, rather than leave as many are doing.

³ The introduction of bond notes, which had been planned by the government at the time of this meeting, was subsequently deferred.