Current politics in Zimbabwe: confronting the crisis

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All authoritarian regimes face limitations that impose constraints on the politics of repression. These limitations take various forms: the economic crisis that such regimes may not have caused, but certainly accelerate, the erosion of national legitimacy as a result of the perceived betrayal of a vision of renewal, the emergence of an alternative political movement, and the growing criticisms of the international community.

All these have been present in the recent history of Zimbabwe. The origins of our crisis pre-date independence. It is necessary to restate this in the light of the revulsion which has grown towards the present government. It is analytically impossible to discuss the problems of internal politics, economics and land reforms, without an understanding of the colonial inheritance.

Yet the knee-jerk reaction to this argument is to dismiss it because of its association with the endless diatribe of a ruling party in a seemingly inexorable slide towards defeat. The Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) can be likened to the Titanic, with its captain, in this case, positively in search of icebergs. But for all of us in search of alternatives, the pressing issues of our past await serious consideration and action.

My intention is to describe the post-colonial context of the present crisis in Zimbabwe. I shall analyse the ways in which a formerly strong nationalist party, with a broad social mandate, has seen its legitimacy eroded over the last two decades. For a state to maintain its right to rule, it must continuously engender the consent of its citizens, through an overall management of society with a minimum use of force.

In addition, it must provide space for dissenting voices to emerge, through processes and structures that are characterised by openness, accountability and the possibility of a peaceful transition to an alternative political regime. These are difficult conditions to guarantee, especially in the context of the economic crisis that prevails in Zimbabwe today.
but they are terms that most Zimbabweans now demand as a prerequisite for a political contract with any future ruling party.

As a nation, we are at the most critical point of our history, struggling to chart a peaceful path beyond our present devastating political and economic conditions. It is appropriate that we should pause to reflect on the post-independence years and gather the ‘resources of hope’ that we desperately require for the decades of reconstruction ahead.

The first and second parts of this chapter provide an overview of the economic and political developments of the 1980s and 1990s. The third section reflects on the more recent developments in the country and examines possible future trends. The extreme conditions in the country demand that we plot a path out of the current crisis. Failure to do this would be to submit to one of the most dangerous effects of authoritarian rule, namely, the inability to see alternatives. Such an exercise demands we avoid looking for easy scapegoats and face honestly the many factors that have brought us to where we are. President Mugabe is a major contributing factor to the Zimbabwean crisis. But he is part of a broader set of obstacles and in the long term these – many of which are beyond our borders – will have to be confronted.

1980s – years of restoration and hope

At independence in 1980, the new government embarked on a vision of ‘national reconciliation’ that, in economic terms, sought to combine a continuity of existing production structures with policies to improve the conditions of the majority of the population neglected during the colonial years.

Confronted with the dilemma of a mass support base seeking immediate redress to long-existing inequalities, the new state sought to pursue a policy of high economic growth rates, increased incomes and social expenditures, and the promotion of rural development. The first Minister of Economic Planning and Development observed that ‘our development strategy goes beyond the mere increase in the material wealth of society. Equity in the distribution of wealth and income is one of the cornerstones of our economic policy.’

The broad objectives of the policy document Growth with Equity [1981] were:

- The establishment of a socialist society.
- Rapid economic growth.
- Balanced development and equitable distribution of income and productive resources.
- Economic restructuring.
- The development of human resources
- Rural development.
Worker participation.
- The development of economic infrastructure and social services.
- Fiscal and monetary reform.

Following this statement of policy, the government launched the Transitional National Development Plan to achieve these objectives. Consequently, much of the 1980s saw an impressive expansion in the social services, as the new government stretched its resources to achieve a rapid delivery of benefits to a highly expectant constituency. This emphasis in policy underlined the state's concerns with equity in the social sectors and the use of aid funds to develop this process.

A reform government consolidating its power

The government's policy on land in this period, and indeed until 1997, was based on a cautious, market-based approach to reform. One leading land expert described the process thus:

*Land was purchased by the state for redistribution following willing-buyer, willing-seller procedures. This framework was agreed to at the Lancaster House Conference. The private sector led the identification and supply of land available for resettlement, while central government was a reactive buyer choosing land on offer. The government provided land to beneficiaries selected mainly by its district officials under the direct supervision of central government officials.¹*

In addition to this legal process of land acquisition, the 1980s witnessed low-intensity land occupations, or 'squatting', carried out by various communities, sometimes unofficially supported by party officials. For the most part, the ruling party opposed such processes of self-provisioning, preferring to follow the legal, market-driven process. Prime Minister Robert Mugabe told 'squatters':

*If we were to ask your forefathers whether they lived in the same area as their ancestors' graves, the answer would be in the negative. Now that we are buying farms to resettle people, who will stay there if you want to protect ancestors' graves? Of course we must protect our ancestors' graves but we must stay on arable land where we can be productive.²*

Using the willing-buyer, willing-seller process, some three million hectares of land were acquired by the end of the 1980s for resettlement. Recent research on what happened during this period indicates that many positive developments resulted, with settlers acquiring access to potable water supplies, dip-tanks, clinics, schools, improved toilets, housing loans, roads and marketing depots. And these areas witnessed a drop in cases of alcoholism, decreased domestic violence and reduced rates of suicide.³ So, while the process was certainly slower than many land-starved rural dwellers might have wished, and it witnessed problems of implementation and funding, it produced some positive and sustainable results. In the current environment of a highly politicised, fast-track process, these achievements are often forgotten.

In the field of labour relations the state took several policy measures to protect workers, such as the Minimum Wages Act and the Employment Act, both passed in 1980. Independence witnessed a series of wildcat strikes where workers expressed their general desire for the immediate fruits of freedom, and the more particular desire of equity with white workers in the same job in the same industry. Through its legislative interventions the government sought to improve both income levels and employment security. In 1985, the government passed the Labour Relations Act, giving greater recognition to workers’ rights to join trade unions while also retaining a measure of control in the hands of the Minister of Labour, similar to the role of the minister under the old colonial Industrial Conciliation Act. The persistence of such powers indicated the new state’s nervousness about conceding power in these early years.

While such policies provided some protection for workers in the 1980s, the longer-term trends in income and employment levels were largely negative. While real wages increased in mining, industry and commerce from 1980-82, thereafter they either declined or remained static for much of the 1980s. In the lowest wage sectors of agriculture and domestic employment, wages increased for much of the 1980s. With regard to employment, growth levels averaged a low 1.72 per cent between 1980 and 1989.

In economic terms, the 1980s were a time of social welfare expenditure, slow land reform, cautious minimum-wage regulation and limited economic growth. The hope that growth would provide a trickle-down effect to the poorest in the country proved forlorn. For a new state, in need of establishing its legitimacy, such trends were disturbing and they indicated a need for a major policy change at the macro-economic level. Given the dramatic collapse of socialist regimes in 1989-90, and

the growing orthodoxy of economic liberalism, there was pressure for the government to move towards a structural-adjustment programme, as had happened in other parts of Africa and the Third World.

In the political field, 1980 witnessed the victory of an uneasy alliance of the two major nationalist parties in the country. Their popular support, as a result of their roles in the liberation struggle, ensured them a strong legitimacy in the immediate post-colonial years. However, the ruling party also had to establish control over the state and over those sections of the population where its support base was weak.

During its first five years, the new government Africanised the state and created a national army out of former warring elements. This was a considerable achievement, taking place as it did against the background of a hostile apartheid state to the south. At the local government level, legislation in 1985 created politically appointed governors in the country's provinces—a move geared towards the consolidation of the ruling party's power in the rural areas. This process of extending the reach of the state marginalised traditional authorities in the country and was a sign of a confident new regime forging its vision of modernity for the young nation.

In carrying out this task, there was a strong element of 'command', reflecting the continuing influence of the often militarist politics of the liberation movements. Such politics emerged in the context of the struggles against a colonial regime embedded in repressive politics and offering few opportunities for democratic participation.

Moreover, this emphasis on the transfer of state power from the old to the new was effected with little concern for the civic rights of individuals—a common feature in post-colonial states. This style of state management soon became apparent in many spheres of Zimbabwean politics.

In the area of labour relations, the countrywide wildcat strikes of 1980-82, already referred to, led to strong government intervention, creating a labour movement subject to party control. The legacy from before independence, a weakened and divided labour movement, allowed the state to set up the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) in 1981, as an arm of the ruling party.

For much of the 1980s, workers were regularly reminded about their subordinate role to the party and, when on strike, chastised for their ingratitude towards the liberation parties. Additionally, the war veterans were active in mobilising support for ZANU PF at the workplace in the early 1980s, pressurising employers to employ war veterans, and becoming involved in workers' committees.

During this period of fragile relations between employers and the state, businesses often adopted the strategy of employing politically-connected lobbyists to walk the corridors of power, to network with the new authority figures, and to represent the interests of their employers. Business leaders built on the work of these lobbyists to forge their own
links with the new civil servants and politicians. This approach was apparent until the mid-1980s, when the new structures of industrial relations began to exert their force, and the ruling party settled into a slower economic-reconstruction programme.

The dominance of ZANU PF could also be seen in its influence over women’s organisations, the student movement, and other civic groups. Non-governmental organisations adopted a low profile and complementary approach to the state, seeking to assist the social welfare policies of the government. The authority of the ruling party went largely unquestioned, as the majority of organisations in the country fell into line behind the development project of the state.

If there were criticisms, they were muted, and few sought to challenge the message of national unity that was invoked at every stage. The emphasis on nation building, across racial and ethnic boundaries, was one that few sought to dispute in the fragile early years of independence. At this stage the ruling party had an immense amount of ideological capital at its disposal, and had a fairly wide margin for political error, a luxury that would begin to dissipate by the end of the first decade of independence.

Yet the veneer of national unity was soon torn asunder in the crisis that developed in Matabeleland and the Midlands in the mid-1980s. The unity between the two major liberation movements, ZANU and the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), forged in the late 1970s under the Patriotic Front, had been based largely on the tactical requirements of negotiations for a political settlement. The tensions that existed between the two movements remained and were heightened after the ZANU PF election victory in 1980. The immediate causes of the outbreak of violence between ‘dissidents’ and government forces was ‘a distrust within, and then repression by, the newly-formed Zimbabwe National Army.’ The repressive response of the state to the crisis marked the post-colonial history of Zimbabwe in ways that have yet to be confronted.

Moreover, the immunity given to the perpetrators of this violence mirrored the action of the Smith regime, in particular during the Internal Settlement period 1978-80, and led to an intensified militarisation of violence and politics in Zimbabwe. An important start to this process would have been for the government to respond to the report produced by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and the Legal Resources Foundation on the violence inflicted on the people of

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**Growing authoritarianism and the emergence of dissenting voices**

The broad impact of this crisis on Zimbabwean politics was to produce a culture of fear and intolerance. The Unity Agreement of 1987, which led to peace between ZANU PF and ZAPU, stopped the violence. But it also ushered in a significant increase in the powers of the executive, in the form of the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Act Number 7. This effectively marginalised the legislature but, as an unintended consequence, placed increased emphasis on the role of the judiciary in restraining the executive.

Added to this were the uneven conditions provided by the state for electoral politics. These included the lack of an independent Electoral Supervisory Commission, the complete domination of the electronic media by the ruling party, the abuse of state funding and resources by the ruling party for electoral purposes, state-led violence against opposition forces and irregularities in the voters' rolls.

The disparity between the *de jure* rights and freedoms enshrined in the Zimbabwean constitution and the *de facto* political rules developed by the state, have provided opposition parties and civic groups opposing the ruling party with important openings for contesting ZANU PF domination. The battles in the courts over the abuse of executive powers and the uneven playing field provided by present electoral laws became the focus for action by civil society groups, especially in the 1990s. Such issues were to feature as a central part of the campaign for constitutional reform after 1997.

By the late 1980s the authoritarianism of the government began to show itself in the move towards a one-party state and in the growing corruption of a ruling elite that displayed little regard for deepening structures of accountability. The Willowgate Scandal in 1988, and the executive pardoning of its perpetrators, was indicative of these trends. It showed the state using a process that could be described as 'class formation behind closed doors'.

In opposition to these developments, dissenting voices began to emerge in the form of student protests, a restructured trade union movement with a strong leadership, and an opposition party – the

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Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) led by Edgar Tekere - formed as a result of challenges within the leadership of the ruling party. Despite its short history, ZUM performed well in the 1990 general election, capturing 17 per cent of the total vote and 26 per cent of the urban vote. In the presidential campaign Tekere won 16 per cent of the votes cast.

The most significant development was the emergence of a revitalised labour movement which, from the mid-1980s, developed a more critical and autonomous position towards the state and began to expand its critique of the government from strictly economic concerns to broader issues of political accountability. Additionally, the trade unions began to nurture political alliances with other social groups, such as students, in a process of building a larger consensus around the need for state accountability.

Thus the first decade of independence ended with growing economic problems, an embryonic opposition movement, and serious fractures in the notion of national unity imposed by the ruling party.

**The 1990s – economic liberalisation and political challenge**

It was clear by the late 1980s that the government’s impressive policies on the expansion of social expenditures were being implemented on the basis of a shrinking economic base. Employment levels were low, growing at only 2.5 per cent between 1985-90, and the prospects for new investment were not encouraging. In a global economic context in which economic liberalisation was the established orthodoxy, and the international financial institutions were the determining agencies for financial assistance, the state adopted the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme in 1990.

There has been a mountain of academic work devoted to the effects of structural adjustment in Africa, and a great deal of debate on its effects in Zimbabwe. Much of the literature has established the negative effects of the programmes on the continent. The indicators for Zimbabwe tend to confirm this trend. Employment growth decreased from 2.5 per cent between 1985-90 to 1.5 per cent in the years 1996-99. Different figures on wage levels indicate sharp declines. The ZCTU point to a drop in real wages from an index of 122 in 1982 to 80.7 in 1999, while a leading annual-earnings survey indicates that the average income in 2000 was 19 per cent lower than in 1980.

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7 In addition, the much-hailed expansion in the education system required a similar expansion in the employment market to accommodate all the school-leavers, eager for work, whose families had invested in their education. See also Brian Raitiopoulos, ‘Education and the Political Crisis in Zimbabwe’, Paper presented at the Canon Collins Memorial Lecture, London, 28 May 2003.
Estimates of the levels of those considered poor increased from 62 per cent in 1995 to 75 per cent in 2000. Looking at the distribution of the gross domestic income (GDI), while the proportion going to wages decreased from 54 per cent in 1987 to 39 per cent in 1999, the share of profits increased from 47 per cent to 61 per cent during the same years. When one adds to these indicators the deteriorating social services in the country, it is clear that the deregulation of the economy has shown few positive benefits for the majority of Zimbabweans. Moreover, such signals were apparent even before the ruling party embarked on the criminalisation of politics that we have witnessed since 2000.

**Rising civic awareness in the mid-1990s**

The escalating crisis in the economy during these years predictably provided the conditions for dramatic developments in the political sphere. Within the ruling party, the internal fissures became more apparent as a number of party cadres, frustrated by the lack of accountability of party structures, pursued their political fortunes as 'independents'. In the election process, the courts became a central arena for disputing irregular procedures, casting a growing shadow over the unfairness of the existing election laws.

The case of Margaret Dongo in Harare South in 1995 was a significant development in this struggle. An ex-combatant from the ruling party, she challenged ZANU PF in an urban constituency and, after a legal battle over irregular election procedures, won the seat as an independent. This victory was an important signal of the growing disenchantment with the ruling party, and the importance of using the judiciary to challenge the election conditions established by ZANU PF. Nevertheless, Dongo’s success also underlined the limitations of various small opposition groups with a limited membership and provided little sense of a general political alternative to ZANU PF.

**Labour relations in the 1990s**

In the labour relations field, the decline of workers’ incomes resulted in more strike actions, characterised by several features: the involvement of increasing numbers of workers and more sectors, more nationwide actions, more regular recourse to strike action as a tool in the collective-bargaining process, recurring actions over unresolved grievances, and

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the growing militancy of public sector workers. The national public sector strike in 1996, in particular, strengthened the links between the ZCTU and the public sector workers, and shook the confidence of the state. The general strike of December 1997 and the mass stay-aways of 1998 established the potential effectiveness of labour as a social movement, signalling the escalating momentum for change in the country.

The skill of the labour movement in developing a broad social alliance against the government showed that effective changes had taken place in the leadership of the ZCTU. A central figure in these changes was Morgan Tsvangirai, a former clerk in the mining industry and a one-time political commissar of ZANU PF, who epitomised the new and challenging voice of labour.

Tsvangirai led a group of unionists in the deepening of shop-floor union structures, the training of union members and the strengthening of the policy content of ZCTU interventions. As the economic crisis in the country deepened, the ZCTU leadership articulated the linkage between this crisis and the problems of governance. Taking this linkage further, the ZCTU played a central role in the formation of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) in 1997, which had as its major objective the need for constitutional reform.

Thus, the ZCTU developed a strong alliance with a wide range of civic organisations around the issues of democratisation and human rights, a terrain on which the ruling party was weak. Moreover, this strategy connected local pressures for change with a global discourse around these concerns. The campaign around constitutional reform became a dominant feature of Zimbabwean politics in the late 1990s. The NCA developed a successful mass campaign, and triggered a process of discussion on reform within the ruling party itself, forcing the government to set up a constitutional commission in 1999.

The cumulative effect of this alliance between the ZCTU and other civic groups was the build-up of pressure for the creation of an opposition party. In addition to the campaign for constitutional reform, the ZCTU organised the National Working People’s Convention in February, 1999, which was attended by some 1,000 delegates, to discuss the crisis in Zimbabwe and chart a way forward.

One of the recommendations that emerged from the convention was that the labour movement should facilitate the formation of a new political party. Thus, as a result of a broad-based discussion amongst civic organisations, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was formed.

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in September, 1999, threatening to provide the biggest political challenge

to ZANU PF since 1980.

In the space of two decades the ZCTU had moved from a weak and
divided movement, under the shadow of a dominant nationalist party, to
be the facilitator of a broad opposition alliance that was challenging for
state power. It was not surprising that the labour movement should play
this role since, as in other developing countries, trade union movements
are often the only civic groups with the national organisational capacity
to undertake such political initiatives.

The war veterans’ intervention

Parallel to these developments, the ruling party faced an even more
convulsive challenge from within its own ranks. The war veterans, who
had formed a lobbying association in 1992, challenged the authority of
the party and the president in 1997, by demanding gratuities for their
role in the liberation struggle. The veterans had always been a key factor
in ZANU PF politics, having since 1980 played a significant role in
marginalising ZIPRA forces in the new national army, and then providing
a mobilising force for ZANU PF in the workplace in the early 1980s.
Their vital role after the events of 2000 will be discussed in the next
section. A recent analysis of the role of the war veterans in Zimbabwean
politics describes their interventions as follows:

Since independence, the political dynamics between war
veterans and the ruling party have been remarkably
consistent. Their relationship has been characterised by
collaboration, conflict, and accommodation. Veterans and the
party have used each other to pursue their different, though
often overlapping, objectives. The party has used veterans to
build its power and legitimacy. It has sanctioned and
encouraged veterans’ violence against its opponents and
rewarded them for work well done. It has invoked its role in
the liberation struggle to justify its use of veterans and its
objectives. Veterans have used their allegedly superior
contribution to the liberation struggle to justify their claims
for preferential access to state resources – jobs, promotions,
pensions, land. In trying to enforce their demands, they have
often used violence and intimidation against competitors for
resources, as well as party leaders and bureaucrats whom
they believed were blocking their progress. For 20 years they
have also sought allies within both the party (members of
parliament, cabinet ministers, senior party officials) and state
institutions (bureaucrats, the army, the police)..."10

10 Krüger, Norma (2001) Zimbabwe’s War Veterans and the Ruling Party: Continuities in
Political Dynamics. Politique Africaine. 84. 80-100.
The challenge to the president in 1997, in the midst of the growing crisis of legitimacy of ZANU PF, presented a crucial moment for his survival. The decision of President Mugabe to give in to the demands for a Z$850,000 payment to each veteran saved the president's position, but created a host of other problems for Zimbabwe.

It precipitated a decisive crash in the Zimbabwean dollar, many of the effects of which are still with us today. The president's decision confirmed the centrality of 'commandist' politics in his thinking, effectively marginalising more democratic participation by a broader range of civic groups. The decision also made it clear that, as the party's support base eroded, the president would become increasingly reliant on coercive measures of mobilisation.

In addition to the demands of the war veterans, ZANU PF faced increasing pressures from other groups, such as the Indigenous Business Development Centre (IBDC) and the Affirmative Action Group (AAG), formed in the 1990s, that lobbied the government for more direct state intervention to assist black entrepreneurs. Confronted by all these demands and with the long-standing pressure for land reform — and with an economy that was contracting through liberalisation — the government faced a massive demand for action to reduce poverty. The move towards more direct state acquisition of land in 1997, and part of the rationale for sending troops to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 1998 in search of new sources of income, were directly related to the deepening crisis in the Zimbabwean economy.

As the 1990s drew to a close, the political scene was marked both by signs of a strong emergent opposition and the menacing presence of coercive party structures being used to consolidate the position of a weakening executive. The millennium opened on a promising, but also threatening, balance of political forces.

2000 and beyond

It is always difficult to isolate the origins of a crisis in society, but it is easier to identify watershed years. The year 2000 constituted an important junction of political events. The government presented its draft constitution, opposed by the NCA, to a referendum in the hope of marginalising the process that had been suggested by the NCA. In the event, the draft was rejected in the referendum and with it the government's hope of taming a process that had escaped its control.

At one level the government's defeat was a result of the way it ignored important views from its outreach programme, which were voiced by the NCA. In particular, this related to the excessive power of the executive. More generally, the rejection was a vote of disillusion with the government. The 'No' vote represented the first major defeat for the ruling party since
independence, and the protest threatened to translate itself into an
election defeat later in the year.

The response of the ruling party was almost immediate, and ruthless.
The president and other party leaders blamed the defeat on the white
minority and some western countries and promised retaliation in volatile
political language. President Mugabe sought to cast his political response
in terms of a general anti-imperialist discourse, that demonised internal
opposition forces as unpatriotic ‘enemies of the state’, and therefore
beyond the pale of the rule of law.

This discourse sought to justify the denigration of civic and political
rights as minority concerns, in the name of a selective manipulation of
redistributive issues around the land question. A combination of war
veterans, unemployed party youths and other party members began a
series of violent land occupations throughout the country. The effect of
these was to connect with a popular grievance around land reform, but
in ways that removed the land issue from the arena of broader public
accountability, and consolidated ZANU PF’s waning support through
violence.

The occupations and the violence continued up to the June 2000
parliamentary elections and beyond, and served to destroy emergent
opposition party structures in the rural areas, cordonning them off to
opposition campaigning. The result was the worst election violence in
Zimbabwe’s history. Some 35 people were killed before and during the
elections, and many human rights abuses were committed, mainly by
ZANU PF. Opposition politicians and their supporters continue to face
death, violence, harassment, and prosecution under the Public Order
and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection
of Privacy Act (AIPPA) that replaced the draconian Law and Order
Maintenance Act, a key instrument of oppression during the colonial
period.

Despite the levels of violence unleashed by the ruling party, the
opposition MDC won 57 seats to ZANU PF’s 62 seats. For a party that
had been in existence for only nine months, this result was a substantial
achievement. And further, because of the level of violence the legitimacy
of the result was immediately questioned, both nationally and
internationally, and the MDC went on to challenge the election results in
39 constituencies.

The MDC won four of those challenges, bringing it almost on a par
with ZANU PF with regard to elected seats, though the ruling party can
rely on the 30 parliamentary un-elected seats controlled by the president
under the present constitution. The case for constitutional reform has
never been so strong, while the legitimacy of the government in power is
at its lowest point since independence.
This weak legitimacy is reflected in the way the government continued
to act in the country. In 2001, the violence of the land occupations and
the elections continued in the by-elections in Bikita West and Marondera
West, as well as in the mayoral elections in Masvingo. Equally disturbing
have been ZANU PF’s attacks on its own state structures, state officials
and laws.

There was a sustained campaign by the executive and the war veterans
against the judiciary, leading to the ‘early retirement’ of the chief justice
and the resignation of two High Court judges. Pursuant to this were the
factory occupations led by the ZANU PF-sponsored Zimbabwe Federation
of Trade Unions (ZFTU), supported by a ‘labour committee’ of senior
party officials and war veterans, which contravened the Labour Relations
Act and the established machinery of industrial relations in order to
resolve outstanding labour disputes.

We have also seen the sacking and intimidation of teachers, health
workers and local government employees by war veterans because of
their alleged support for the MDC. Through these measures state
structures and personnel have been attacked in order to re-establish
the dominance of the ruling party. This strategy has caused consternation
among certain leaders in ZANU PF who fear the loss of control of the
party to more anarchic elements. On 19 January 2001, the Zimbabwe
Independent reported the national chairman of the ruling party, John
Nkomo, warning of ‘an element of insolence and indiscipline by some
war veterans’, reminding the latter that ‘the party comes first’. Such
concerns were also expressed by Nkomo over the factory invasions.

In the area of the media, the new Broadcasting Services Act (No. 3 of
2001), fast-tracked through parliament in April 2001, is an attempt to
control alternative opinions in the electronic media, particularly through
the radio which is the dominant source of information for the rural
population. The banning of the recent programme sponsored by the
National Development Association (NDA), Talk to the Nation, emphasised
the government’s intolerance, even towards sympathetic organisations.
The words of a Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) official
justifying the withdrawal of the programme showed a total lack of
awareness of the irony of authoritarian regimes:

It is not all about money. Live productions can be tricky and
dangerous. The setting on the NDA productions was
professionally done but maybe the production should not have
been broadcast live. You do not know what someone will come
and say and there is no way of controlling it.\footnote{ZBC switches off NDA sponsored live TV programme, The Herald, 6 June 2001.}
The government has also introduced legislation to control foreign financing of political parties, and has moved to control non-governmental organisations (NGOs) by stopping their involvement in civic education. Both these positions are designed to proscribe the viability of opposition forces. Combined with these measures, the ruling party has established its own civic bodies to rival the influence of those organisations that have formed the basis for opposition politics in the country. In the students' movement, the ruling party has sponsored the Zimbabwe Progressive Students' Union (ZPSU) and the Zimbabwe Congress of Students' Unions (ZICOSU) to counter the influence of the Zimbabwe National Students' Union (ZINASU). The established ZCTU has been confronted by the ZFTU.

Similar developments have also occurred in the area of constitutional reform, where the NDA was set up to confront the NCA, and rival municipal residents' associations have been sponsored to offset the more critical structures. The common denominator of these organisations is their lack of a substantive membership base. Once again, these actions resemble the survival strategies attempted by the Smith regime in the dying days of settler colonialism.

**Escalating repression of dissent**

The central purpose of all these measures was to eliminate centres of dissent and create more conducive conditions for a ZANU PF victory in the presidential elections. For much of the independence years, the party was prepared to tolerate a minimum level of electoral competition as long as single-party dominance was not threatened. The existence of civic groups complemented its service delivery to the state. But when this situation no longer prevailed and the possibility of defeat became more apparent, the governing elite lost its facade of tolerance and unleashed its repressive party and state machinery. Yet this strategy of intimidation began to have diminishing returns and even backfired. The Masvingo mayoral election showed that the MDC could win even under violent conditions.

The intention of the factory invasions was to provide quick victories for workers and undermine the ZCTU with alternative structures and so weaken the urban base of the MDC, but the results proved disastrous for the government. While the ZCTU structures were certainly strained and divisions were engendered by the splinter unions set up by the ZFTU, the labour movement has survived the assault. Many workers used the invasions to settle long-standing issues without surrendering the autonomy of their union structures and so proving the importance of strong institutional structures among non-state organisations. Moreover, the invasion of certain international NGOs and South African companies drew strong criticisms from both the international
community and, more significantly, the South African government. The loss of employment resulting from this strategy, combined with the stalling of the fast-track land reform programme, provided the more reform-minded members of the government with the opportunity to reassert the legal structures of the state, and temporarily place some restraint on the invasions.

The final futility of the factory invasions was that it succeeded in doing, in a few months, what the opposition had been trying to do since the land occupations began: it shifted the national discussion from the land question to the more general issue of the economy, on which the ruling party’s position is extremely weak.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three major points to be stressed about the political crisis in Zimbabwe. The first concerns the pervasive violence of the Zimbabwean state. In the early 1980s the Mugabe regime used the war veterans to consolidate its control of the state, and then proceeded to demobilise this force when its position in power was more secure. Similarly, the state marginalised the influence of traditional authorities, as it extended its powers to local government level. After two decades of independence, and in the context of a massive loss of state legitimacy, we have witnessed certain reversals in that process. The embattled regime has once again turned to the war veterans to enforce its party dominance by attacking those state structures and personnel considered ‘disloyal’ to the ruling party. The regime has also breached its own laws in order to maintain state power. This coercive strategy has attempted to destroy those civic organisations and processes that have been critical of the post-colonial state. It is as though an influential faction of the ruling party has used the unpopularity of the state to attack its own structures, as an opposition force, in order to reconsolidate ZANU PF dominance.

Second, it is clear that a severe break has developed between the discourse and politics of the liberation struggle and that of the civic struggles for democratisation in the post-colonial period. In part, this tension can be traced to the period of the emergence of mass nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the differences have deepened over

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the last decade. The dichotomy was neatly captured in a Daily News report at the time of the Bindura by-election, which described the two candidates in the following terms: Phebe, 32, represents the new politics of democracy, while Manyika, 46, epitomises the old politics of the liberation struggle.\footnote{The Daily News, 24 July 2001.}

This tension has developed in the context of a declining liberation movement that has drawn a lethal distinction between a violently driven anti-imperialist project, centred around the land question, and the politics of human rights which it has characterised as an imposition of global imperialist politics. Any sense of national ownership of such rights issues is lost in this characterisation. This position is captured in the simplistic ruling party slogan, ‘The land is the economy, the economy is the land’, which has been translated into politics of exclusion, racial essentialism, and violence.

On the other hand, the civic opposition has espoused its project largely through the language of citizenship rights, articulated most clearly in the campaign for constitutional reform. Yet these politics of democratisation have not sufficiently negotiated their connections, as well as their differences, with the legacy of the liberation struggle.

The interventions of the Zimbabwe Liberators’ Platform, a group of war veterans that have opposed the current strategy of ruling party violence, are an important attempt to make such connections. Zimbabweans are in a very good position to advance such a dialogue, which is an issue that is confronting all the countries of Southern Africa that have emerged from settler colonialism after an extended liberation struggle.

Third, and emerging from the previous point, is the manner in which the role of violence has been articulated in Zimbabwean politics. For the ruling party, violence in the post-colonial period is an extension of the liberation struggle – a necessary means to achieve a political agenda. The dehumanising and delegitimising effects of this strategy on Zimbabwe citizens have been considered essential for maintaining state power.

In response, the forces of opposition have used their critique of this violence as a pivotal part of their demand for alternative politics. Yet this critique has not acknowledged sufficiently the systemic violence to which post-colonial states, like Zimbabwe, continue to be subjected by the forces of global finance. And so they are not sufficiently prepared for the difficult confrontations and choices that any government in a marginalised state will have to make in a project of economic and political reconstruction.
Zimbabwe: The Past is the Future

At present, the future of Zimbabwe is balanced on a knife-edge, as an ageing and increasingly unpopular nationalist leader struggles to secure his position. The test of a political transition is upon us as a nation, and the failure to deal with this challenge could lead to heightened civil conflict. We must make every effort to avoid such a disastrous option.