



TSVANGIRAI FACING CRITICAL CHOICES

No one is quite clear what the opposition's next step will be, but any delay will benefit the president most.

By Mike Nyoni in Harare

Zimbabwe's political stalemate looks set to continue as President Robert Mugabe settles in for another term and Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, struggles to respond to the new, post-election environment.

Tsvangirai, who pulled out of the presidential race five days before the June 27 run-off, now faces a dilemma over whether to accept Mugabe's offer of talks or to claim the moral high ground by refusing compromise.

The MDC leader has been bolstered by support from traditional sympathisers United States, Britain and Australia, now joined by France and Italy, as well as by Botswana's refusal to recognise Mugabe as president.

As foreign governments continue to question Mugabe's legitimacy and ponder additional sanctions against



Credit: Lazele

MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai addresses the press at his house in Harare. Picture taken June 22, 2008.

Zimbabwe, any decision they take will be influenced by what Tsvangirai does next.

Some observers believe that while the opposition leader's withdrawal from the election was motivated by principle — he argued that taking part would lead to more bloodshed — it was a tactical blunder nonetheless. They believe he was calculating that Mugabe would

halt the election process and simply declare himself winner. That would have allowed Tsvangirai to urge the international community to recognise him as president since he beat Mugabe in the first round, held on March 29.

Since Mugabe went ahead with the ballot anyway, the position has become much muddier,

NEWS IN BRIEF

- United States and British officials have voiced concern and disappointment at the vetoing of a package of sanctions against President Robert Mugabe and 13 of his associates. On July 11, Russia and China, two of the five Security Council members with the right of veto, opposed the proposal brought by the other three — the US, Britain and France.
- British prime minister Gordon Brown said on July 14 that he had asked the treasury to hunt down assets of those closest to President Mugabe.
- ZANU-PF and the Movement for Democratic Change this week continued discussions on a draft agreement that would allow talks to begin on some kind of power-sharing agreement. The talks-about-talks began in Pretoria last week.
- Zimbabwean churches and civic groups have launched talks with the major political parties to find a home-grown solution to the political impasse. Church leaders in South Africa, meanwhile, called for a swift resolution to the Zimbabwean crisis as thousands of refugees continued to pour across the border.
- Bread has disappeared from shop shelves as the majority of baking companies have suspended work due to flour shortages.

Analysts say any delay in the political process could now work in Mugabe's favour, allowing him to consolidate his hold on power and giving his ZANU-PF party time to consider another option — finding a successor from within the regime to keep international criticism at bay.

According to Eldred Masunungure, a political sciences lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe, if the regime were able to engineer a seamless change of leadership, allowing Mugabe to step aside, Zimbabwe's southern African neighbours might be prepared to overlook the flawed election.

"The dynamics in the region and the international community might change and the MDC find itself forgotten again," he said. "The region is feeling the contagion of the Zimbabwean crisis and will grasp at anyone who promises a quick end to this."

Two days before the African Union issued its call for power-sharing in a "government of national unity", Mugabe used his June 29 inauguration ceremony to make what sounded like conciliatory noises, saying he was prepared to negotiate with the MDC as long as it shared his vision of the country's future.

However, he returned from the African Union summit in more belligerent mood, demanding that Tsvangirai and the MDC recognise him as president before he would contemplate negotiations. He also demanded that the West lift the sanctions imposed on him and his inner circle after his disputed election victory in 2000.

Tsvangirai, meanwhile, declared that he would not negotiate with an "illegitimate president".

When South African president Thabo Mbeki paid a fleeting visit to Zimbabwe on the weekend of July 5-6 in a bid to revive his mediation effort between the MDC and ZANU-PF, Tsvangirai refused to meet him on the grounds that going to the venue, State House, would be tantamount to acknowledging Mugabe as head of state.

The Zimbabwean opposition views the South African leader's claim to neutrality with more than a little suspicion, suspecting him of favouring Mugabe.

Mbeki has been acting as mediator on behalf of the Southern African Development Community, SADC, a grouping of regional states. The recent African Union summit asked the SADC to continue leading the mediating effort instead of taking on a more robust role itself, as some had hoped it would.

Some observers say continued reluctance to engage in negotiations could prove another error on Tsvangirai's part. He may occupy the high ground, but he might have to make concessions in the face of demands for an end to Zimbabwe's profound political and economic crisis.

"Mugabe says he wants to talk, so Tsvangirai has got to talk, otherwise people will see him as the stumbling block to the resolution of the crisis," said Richard Chitova, a rural schoolteacher in Mashonaland Central province. "People are tired of the crisis and want it to end quickly."

Masunungure agreed with this view, saying, "Dialogue is unavoidable and inevitable. Neither of the parties has a solution to the country's structural problems on his own... Tsvangirai may have the legitimacy but he doesn't have political power. Mugabe's legitimacy may be questionable but he has the means to remain in power."

Should negotiations take place, Masunungure notes that the MDC will be forced to accept a lesser role since Mugabe is now officially president again.

"The trouble is that while the MDC was preoccupied with means and legality, Mugabe wanted to retain power by any means necessary and that is what he has done. He has already been installed, though we should not confuse legality and legitimacy," he said.

Tsvangirai's dilemma about what his next move should be is complicated by the high risks associated with

deploying one of his most powerful forms of leverage — asking the international community to impose more sanctions on Zimbabwe.

The United States and its allies have proposed tougher sanctions and have even suggested the introduction of a peacekeeping force to stem the bloodletting.

According to Masunungure, an open call for sanctions could alienate Tsvangirai both from his voters and from other African nations.

"This is a tricky issue," said Masunungure. "They [the MDC] cannot call for the imposition of more sanctions on the country when people are suffering. This would alienate even the support of SADC [Southern African Development Community] neighbours. Similarly, the MDC cannot boast of its ability to bring foreign aid to revive the economy without being accused of supporting the current sanctions. It's a double-edged sword."

So it is back to the drawing board again, and that could spell a further period of political violence, as well as the apparently endless economic meltdown.

The MDC says more than 100 of its supporters were killed by pro-Mugabe militias before and during the second-round election.

Masunungure argues that on its own, Mugabe's government can do nothing useful to save the economy. Inflation has reached astronomical heights, unemployment stands at 85 per cent of the population, and food and fuel are in short supply.

The food situation worsened in the run-up to the presidential run-off, as the government banned aid groups from operating in the countryside, accusing them of using food distribution as a campaign tool for the MDC — a claim these organisations deny.

Mike Nyoni is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

MUGABE'S POST-ELECTION MEDIA BLITZ

Zimbabwean leader appears desperate to shore up support at home in the face of mounting criticism abroad.

By Hativagone Mushonga in Harare

In the face of growing condemnation from the international community, President Robert Mugabe is appealing to the Zimbabwean public for support as he battles for legitimacy.

In what amounts to an after-the-fact election campaign, the state-owned media have gone into overdrive to try to salvage Mugabe's battered image after the second-round presidential election held on June 27.

Mugabe seems to be seeking a public mandate only now that the election is over.

The run-up to the ballot was one of the most violent election periods the country has seen, with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, saying 113 of its supporters were killed and thousands of others beaten, tortured and displaced.

The election had been conceived as a run-off between Mugabe and the MDC candidate Morgan Tsvangirai — who won more votes than the incumbent in the first round on March 29, but according to the official returns, not the majority required to be elected outright. However, Mugabe ended up as the sole candidate when his rival withdrew from the contest, citing fears that more MDC supporters would suffer acts of violence.



Credit: Lazele

Man reading a ZANU-PF post-election newspaper advert. Picture taken July 16, 2008.

Advertisements now being aired on public radio every 20 minutes or so feature Mugabe thanking the nation for voting for him and for their “faith and confidence” in him.

“I feel honoured and humbled,” he says. “Our challenge today and in the years ahead is to move forward in unity, regardless of our diverse political affiliations, united by the sense of a common vision and destiny for a prosperous Zimbabwe.”

“I feel honoured and humbled” — President Mugabe, in a TV ad.

Full-page advertisements in state-run newspapers feature a younger-looking, smiling Mugabe, saying, “The people of Zimbabwe have spoken. Let us therefore continue rebuilding our nation. Thank you for rejecting recolonisation of our precious

Zimbabwe by the western powers. I know you believe and I believe that all good things are possible. God bless Zimbabwe. Thank you for voting for me — thank you for voting in peace.”

Thank you for voting for me — thank you for voting in peace” — Mugabe, in newspaper advert.

The advertisements portray Mugabe as the champion of the Zimbabwean people, someone who has fought relentlessly for their sovereignty and has once again won a mandate to govern them.

However, despite this media blitz, observers say Zimbabweans will not easily forgive the president for masterminding the bloodletting in the run-up to the polls, or for the humiliation he inflicted on the electorate.

A veteran Zimbabwean journalist, who requested anonymity, told IWPR that Mugabe appeared desperate to win the legitimacy the international community, including some former allies in Africa, have refused him after what is widely seen as a sham election.

Mugabe “seems desperate for acceptance from Zimbabweans and for them to recognise him as the legitimate president” — local journalist.

“The main aim of the advert is to prop up and polish Mugabe’s image. He seems desperate for acceptance from Zimbabweans and for them to recognise him as the legitimate president. This is the first time Mugabe has shown himself so desperate for public support,” said the journalist.

A senior official with a non-governmental organisation, who asked not to be named out of concern for his security, believes Zimbabweans will find it difficult to forgive and forget.

“His advertisements would have been more effective if he had acknowledged the violence, demanded an immediate end to it and issued a stern warning to those who continue to engage in it,” said the official.

Aside from the violence, the prospect of continuing hardship is a major concern for the electorate. With no resolution to the political crisis in sight, the government looks unlikely to find any way out of the country’s deep-set economic problems.

Rutendo Ruzvidzo, a primary school teacher, blames Mugabe for the long-

running economic meltdown, and specifically for the fact that she is unable to survive on her salary and is living in near destitution.

“As long as people continue to suffer, Zimbabweans will not be able to accept Mugabe, who they believe cheated them. A thank-you message alone, without offering a solution to the economic crisis, will not win him the acceptance he wants,” she said.

“Personally, I would have preferred a message saying, ‘Thank you, Zimbabweans, for voting for me, but for the sake of national interest and for the love of my people, I have decided to step down.’ Such a message would have earned him some respect and restored him some dignity, which he desperately needs from the people of Zimbabwe.”

“A thank-you message alone... will not win him the acceptance he wants” — primary school teacher Rutendo Ruzvidzo.

Alex Mukaka, who comes from the southern province of Masvingo but is currently in the capital Harare recovering from wounds he sustained during the violence, said people in the countryside would never again fully accept Mugabe because of the violence perpetrated by his security forces and youth militias.

“We were stripped of our dignity during the run-up to the election and also on election day itself. We were driven like beasts into torture bases every day. We spent whole nights in the mountains where we were intimidated and humiliated by mere youths who were not born at the time

of the [1970s] liberation war. On voting day, we were herded like sheep into the polling booths where we voted against our will,” he said. “We are people who think to be treated like animals was very insulting.”

The president’s sudden desire for public approval comes against a backdrop of crumbling support from African leaders who were formerly sympathetic to his robust defiance of external criticism.

“To be treated like animals was very insulting” — Masvingo resident Alex Mukaka.

That includes countries in the immediate neighbourhood, which are members of the Southern African Development Community, SADC. One of these, Botswana, has refused to accept the results of the election, and is urging its neighbours not to recognise Mugabe as president and to suspend Zimbabwe from both the SADC and the African Union.

“As a country that practises democracy and the rule of law, Botswana does not... recognise the outcome of the presidential run-off election, and would expect other SADC member states to do the same,” Foreign Minister Phandu Sekelemani said on July 4.

The Zimbabwean authorities, he said, should not be allowed to participate in SADC meetings “until such time as they demonstrate their commitment to strictly adhere to the organisation’s principles”.

Hativagone Mushonga is the pseudonym of a reporter in Harare. ■

BILLION-DOLLAR POVERTY IN ZIMBABWE

As the national currency continues to plummet in value, the real business is done in foreign banknotes.

By Nonthando Bhebhe in Harare

The Zimbabwean dollar's headlong devaluation has proved impossible to halt despite all efforts by the central bank. With the exchange rate now close to 20 billion to the United States dollar, traders are sticking to foreign currency to preserve a measure of sanity in their prices.

In early May, Reserve Bank governor Gideon Gono that the Zimbabwe dollar, ZWD, would no longer be held to a fixed exchange rate but would be allowed to float freely. The immediate result was that Zimbabweans flocked to the banks to offload their foreign currency at the new, more realistic rate.

Since then, the bank has stuck to its guns and allowed the exchange rate to move with the market, but any hope that the devaluation would eventually bottom out has been dashed. The hyperinflation gripping the economy — estimated at nine million per cent compared with last year — has made it impossible for the ZWD to stabilise.

The central bank has been printing banknotes in larger and larger denominations, but never fast enough to increase their purchasing power.

When the largest denomination yet, the 50 billion ZWD note, came out about a month ago, it bought five loaves of bread. Today it takes two notes — 100 billion dollars — to buy just one loaf.

Gono's announcement meant that commercial banks were able to buy foreign currency from the public at a more competitive rate than what black-market currency dealers could offer.



Credit: Lazele

Bread for sale at exorbitant prices on a busy Harare street. Picture taken July 11, 2008.

That worked for a while, and temporarily wiped out the illegal currency trade.

However, as the ZWD became more worthless than ever, people went back to the US dollar and South African rand, even for purchases of the most basic foodstuffs.

This week, it takes two 50-billion-dollar notes just to buy a loaf of bread.

The gap between what the banks and the street traders are offering is no longer so huge as it was before the ZWD was allowed to float, but the black market is still very healthy because demand for strong foreign currencies is so high.

"Even though we peg our rates slightly higher than the banks, the public still flocks to us," said currency dealer Edmund Dube.

Abel Mhofu, a chicken farmer in Wedza, some 100 kilometres south of Harare, is among the many Zimbabweans who have lost all respect for the national currency.

Every weekend, Mhofu brings about 50 chickens to town and sells them for four American dollars each. "I buy my fuel in foreign currency and import almost all my stock feed from Zambia, so for me selling in the Zim dollar is not an option," he explained.

Mhofu was pleasantly surprised by the response from his customers when he began to demand foreign currency only. "I thought there would be resistance but I find that many people, including those in what we called ordinary households, have foreign currency in their possession," he said.

Some of the foreign banknotes come from the many Zimbabweans who have become cross-border traders travelling to neighbouring countries to buy things to sell at home. But the diaspora continues to be the main source of foreign currency, with

Zimbabweans relatives abroad sending money home to keep their families going.

“Every family now has at least one member in the diaspora or who travels regularly in the region in search of money,” said Dube.

With Zimbabwe’s economic crisis now in its eighth year, an estimated 85 per cent of the population are unemployed, while many of those in formal employment earn less than 300 billion ZWD a month, or about 15 US dollars. The Reserve Bank has restricted withdrawals to a maximum of 100 billion ZWD, and anything left in a bank account loses value on a daily if not hourly basis.

“All Zimbabweans now understand why they should keep their money in foreign currency,” said Dube. “People from across the economic divide have now turned into forex dealers. Even vendors are now selling their wares in other currencies.”

Dube plies his trade at the Roodepoort bus terminal, which is better known as the “World Bank” these days because various foreign currencies are so freely available.

The marginalisation of the national currency could have a further destabilising effect on the economy as President Robert Mugabe tries to consolidate his grip following the June

27 presidential run-off election, in which he was the sole candidate.

According to an economist with Barclays Bank of Zimbabwe, the country has defied all economic wisdom by staying afloat for so long.

“Many have predicted Zimbabwe’s collapse and President Mugabe and his government have described the predictions as the work of prophets of doom,” said the economist, who did not want to be named. “But now they may just have run out of time.”

Aggravating the problem is the fact that the Reserve Bank might soon have nothing to print its banknotes on, following a decision by the Munich-based company that supplied the paper to stop doing business with Zimbabwe.

For Zimbabweans, the stalled political process and the leadership’s apparent inability to reverse economic decline mean the future looks bleak.

Takudzwa Nyauchi, a professional in Harare, cares less about politics than his monthly salary of 300 billion ZWD.

“I can’t keep on surviving like this. I have a wife and three children to look after and also the extended family back in the rural areas,” he said.

IWPR caught up with Nyauchi as he was starting home after work, on foot.

He cannot afford public transport, which would cost between 20 and 30 billion ZWD a day, so he walks the 20 km to work and the same distance home.

He is not alone — continual increases in petrol prices mean many people now walk up to 40 km to reach their jobs.

“Money devalues at the blink of an eye,” said Nyauchi. “With my paltry salary I have to do other things to survive... I am doing whatever I can to survive, but it is still not enough.”

Like most Zimbabweans, Nyauchi has dropped eggs, milk, meat, margarine and even bread from his normal diet. “I skip breakfast and lunch — I only have one meal a day. If I am lucky, I have maize-meal porridge — that is if we have sugar. It makes me want to cry when I look at my children,” he said.

Zimbabwe’s cities are quickly becoming open-air markets, with roadside stalls popping up everywhere selling vegetables from people’s gardens or goods from their homes, as they strive to earn enough to survive.

On the streets of Harare, one banana now costs 10 billion dollars. At 50 US cents, that is quite expensive.

Nonthando Bhebhe is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

The Zimbabwe Crisis Report is an initiative of IWPR-Africa’s Zimbabwe Programme. This programme promotes democratization and good governance with Southern Africa and contributes to the development of a culture of human rights and the rule of law. Focusing on Zimbabwe the programme has three core components —

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