



Prospects for Change in Zimbabwe

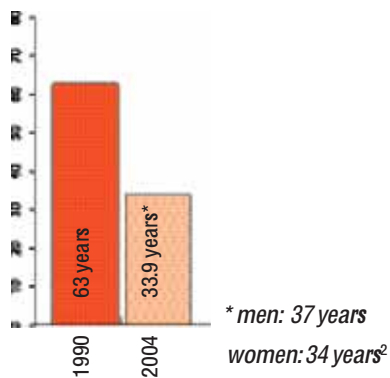
These notes are offered to Members ahead of the Commons debate on July 19th 2007. They argue that in developing a practical response to the crisis in Zimbabwe, British policy-makers must recognise the realistic prospect of continued deterioration and the entrenched obstacles to recovery:

- **Crisis of legitimacy will not end if Mugabe quits.**
- **Ruling hegemony includes beneficiaries of economic meltdown.**
- **A practical response must engage both sides – and rival factions – in Harare.**

A Country in Free Fall?

Life expectancy in Zimbabwe is the lowest in the world, and a third of the population will depend on Food Aid this year¹. But despite this, a significant proportion of Zimbabweans remain partially insulated from the full impact of economic collapse.

Comparative Life Expectancy in Zimbabwe:



At least a third of the population depend on remittances from abroad. Others eke a living from the land, malnourished but to some extent protected from hyperinflation. For a small elite of well-connected speculators, meanwhile, the shrinking economy has brought new opportunities. Some have never had it so good.

Insiders with access to hard currency, staple crops, commodities and looted industrial assets are able to turn huge profits in the parallel market for scarce resources. Many would welcome Mugabe's departure, but all are beneficiaries of the crisis with a vested interest in the continued hegemony of Zanu-PF, the ruling party.

A Credible Opposition?

The emergence of an organised national opposition grouping in 2000 attracted substantial support for the Movement for Democratic Change – at home and in the West. But state repression and internal feuding have disabled party structures, graphically illustrated in the March 2007 beatings of MDC leaders in police custody.

The MDC split in 2005 after internal feuds and dispute over whether to contest elections to a new Senate. Welshman Ncube, a senior official in the breakaway faction which argued for contesting the poll, recently suggested that MDC participation has assisted Zanu efforts to "legitimise" its claim of a democratic mandate.³

Both MDCs are now understood to favour an electoral pact, short of re-unification. They are likely to contest parliamentary and presidential elections under the leadership of Morgan Tsvangirai. But the low turnout for a general strike called by trade unions in May 2007 indicates the difficulty of mobilising even his core supporters.

Turn Off The Lights?

There is no reason to expect an "Orange"-style uprising against Mugabe, nor that dissenters pose a serious threat to the state. Instead, some critics of "quiet diplomacy" have urged external intervention – citing a previous era of foreign policy. In the late 1970s, South Africa's apartheid regime threatened to cut supplies of electricity to then Rhodesia unless Ian Smith's minority government entered negotiations with guerrilla movements.



Thabo Mbeki remains reluctant to adopt such a stance today. This has been attributed to a shared nationalist heritage between neighbouring presidents – “the same political DNA,” reported *Newsweek*. But historically, there was no such affinity. Relations between the ANC (sponsored by Moscow) and Zanu (sponsored by Beijing) have always been strained, and remain uncertain today.

“We would not ever support any proposition about regime change, so that is not an option for us, whatever other people might think in the rest of the world.”

– South African president Thabo Mbeki.⁴

Pretoria continues to favour an “elegant exit” for Mugabe, making way for some form of transitional authority or coalition. Promises of external support for this process have been linked to minimum standards in a democratic election. Most regional leaders anticipate that elements of Zanu will retain power – and very possibly also the presidency – in any new administration.

A carrot or a stick?

Mugabe is a reluctant participant in the regional mediation brokered by Mbeki on behalf of the Southern African Development Community. Delegates representing Zanu at recent talks have been minor officials, from outside the president’s inner circle. But analyst Brian Raftopoulos interprets the invitation to Mugabe to attend the EU summit in Portugal in August as the prize in a tentative behind-the-scenes deal.⁵

Any agreement is likely to concern simultaneous parliamentary and presidential elections, which Pretoria wants to be held in March 2008. But Mugabe has moved to strengthen his influence over rival factions within Zanu. A proposed amendment to the constitution (No. 18) would enable parliament to nominate his successor, and Mugabe to delay the polls until 2010.

Prospects for earlier elections depend more on finding incentives than building opprobrium from outside. In practical terms, these are likely to include credible assurances of development aid, multilateral finance for land reform and

amnesty from prosecution. Zanu officials are mindful that previous guarantees to former presidents Charles Taylor of Liberia and Frederick Chiluba of Zambia were swiftly overturned.⁶

After Mugabe?

Moeletsi Mbeki, a staunch critic of Zanu and brother of the South African president, laments “the myth of the big white chief who will come with his money” to rescue Zimbabwe.⁷ Commercial farms are in disarray despite a very modest recovery this year, while the market for Virginia tobacco is lost to more competitive producers in Brazil. Other industrial sectors traditionally depend on servicing tobacco exporters.

Political transition of any sort will demand external collaboration with Zimbabwe’s secretive militarist – a process which in turn requires some rehabilitation of Zanu. Given the militarisation of Zimbabwe’s civil institutions, the legitimacy of any new president will be contested.

“I don’t think in the last fifty years that Zimbabwe has ever known democracy”

– Nkosana Moyo, former minister of trade and industry who left Zimbabwe in 2001.⁸

At a policy level, diverse projects are underway to draft plans for a political and economic transition – among local industrialists, the diaspora, in Pretoria and development agencies. Although there is speculation that Zanu will fragment after Mugabe, effective reform will require participation of state institutions and others within the current hegemony.

There are as yet no compelling grounds to expect the crisis of legitimacy in Zimbabwe will end after Mugabe.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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¹ Source: World Food Programme

² Source: United Nations

³ *South African Mail & Guardian*, May 2007

⁴ *Financial Times*, April 3, 2007

⁵ Interview with Mark Ashurst

⁶ Source: Briefing from Embassy of Zimbabwe, London

⁷ Interview with Mark Ashurst

⁸ Interview with Mark Ashurst