

Zimbabwe: Mugabe government abandons the rule of law

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Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's president since independence from Britain in 1980, has abandoned the rule of law and resorted to outright dictatorship. His government faces mounting opposition from all layers of society due to rapidly deteriorating economic and social conditions, the failure to distribute land and the war in the Congo.

Mugabe has arrested, jailed and tortured journalists, imposed bans on the media, outlawed strikes and "stay-aways" and allowed the military and the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) to arrest and detain civilians. He has openly flouted court orders and challenged judges to resign.

Two weeks ago, students boycotted classes and demonstrated on the streets of Harare in protest over long overdue grants and loans. They were the latest in a long line of groups--including landless peasants, trade unionists, the church, human rights organisations, judges and lawyers--expressing their opposition to Mugabe.

Unemployment has more than trebled since Mugabe came to power 19 years ago. In 1996 only 11 percent of the population was formally employed. Real income per capita has plummeted. By the beginning of this year it had fallen by one-third since 1979. Inflation last year was more than 50 percent and interest rates are well over 40 percent. The value of the Zimbabwe dollar has fallen by more than 65 percent in the last year.

HIV/AIDS has taken a terrible toll. With 25 percent of people aged 15 to 49 infected with the HIV virus, Zimbabwe is the worst affected country in Africa. Pregnant women are infected at a 20 to 50 percent rate, and about one-third of these women will pass the virus on to their babies.

The land question has long been the central and most controversial issue in Zimbabwe. Despite the repeal of the 1969 Land Tenure Act-- which reserved 50 percent of the land, including the most fertile arable land, for whites--30 percent is still owned by 4,000 white commercial farmers. The overwhelming majority have insufficient land to feed themselves and their families. In 1992, a Land Acquisition Act was supposed to provide for the acquisition of up to half of all white-owned land for redistribution, but white farmers

appealed and put a stop to it in 1995. Faced with mounting opposition and riots of starving peasants, in which six people were shot dead by the security forces in 1997-98, the government again sought to redistribute some of the land without compensation. Opposition from white farmers and the International Monetary Fund brought this to a halt.

Zimbabwe's decision to go to war to protect Congo's President Laurent Kabila in 1998 has proved costly. The Kabila regime owes it \$93 million for weapons and equipment and the government held out hopes of lucrative new markets at the end of the war. While a few well-connected businessmen have benefited, the masses have borne a terrible financial and social cost. It is estimated that an incredible 80 percent of Zimbabwe's armed forces in the Congo are infected with HIV. For years the army was closely aligned with Mugabe's ZANU-PF party. But the war is hugely unpopular within the armed forces.

With wages failing to keep up with inflation, strikes have increased. In 1996 there were major strikes in health and other services. Protests by veterans from the eight-year-long military operations in the Mozambique war forced the government to make payments of Z\$3.5 billion. In 1998 food price increases sparked the worst riots in Harare since independence. The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) held one-day strikes at the end of last year to demand that the government cut its spending on the Congolese war and lower inflation and interest rates. Mugabe responded by declaring strikes illegal.

In mid-January, *Standard* newspaper editor Mark Chavunduka and reporter Ray Choto were illegally detained and tortured after writing a story about a failed military coup. Mugabe initiated a campaign of harassment against the press, which has met widespread opposition.

The Supreme Court wrote to the president urging him to uphold the rule of law, carry out three High Court orders to release the journalists and not use the CIO to arrest and detain civilians. Mugabe went on television to launch a vitriolic attack on the judges and journalists. "If the *Standard* had not behaved in such a blatantly dishonest and unethical

manner, the army would not have acted in the way it did," he declared. The two journalists have since been charged under the Law and Order Maintenance Act, used by the colonial Rhodesian government to suppress opposition.

Mugabe challenged the judges to resign, saying that they had no right to instruct him to do anything and that, because of their biased petition, the government could no longer trust them on any case involving the executive.

Lawyers demonstrated outside the parliament against Mugabe's flagrant flouting of Zimbabwe's laws. The IMF is now talking about delaying the release of crucial financial aid to the country. From the IMF's perspective, the problem is not the social catastrophe engulfing the Zimbabwean workers and peasants, but the threat to profits and debt repayments from increasing political instability.

Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party reaches into every corner of Zimbabwe's society. ZANU-PF controls 147 out of parliament's 150 seats and there is no effective opposition party. There is a network of CIO agents throughout the urban and rural areas. Corruption, fraud and mismanagement are widespread.

Many sections of society are opposed to Mugabe and calling for his removal. Parallels have begun to be drawn with Indonesia and Suharto. Yet this was one of the men who led the struggle for political independence in Zimbabwe and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1980.

The transformation of leaders such as Mugabe into venal despots expresses the antagonistic relationship of the national bourgeoisie to the oppressed masses of workers and peasants. None of the states in Africa created by decolonisation have been able to evolve along genuinely democratic lines, redistribute the land and satisfy the aspirations of the masses. Far from seeking to overthrow the existing social order, the national bourgeoisie took the place of the old colonial rulers in exploiting the country's working class and natural resources while to a growing degree acting as the political agents for the interests of the imperialist governments and transnational corporations.

Zimbabwe was ruled for decades as a fiefdom by the British South Africa Company, which owned the rights to all the gold and minerals under the concessions extracted from the Ndebele ruler by Cecil Rhodes. As Southern Rhodesia, based on agriculture and mining, it only became a self-governing colony within the British Empire in 1923. It formed a federation with neighbouring African states in 1953. When in the late 1950s and 1960s all the other African states were gaining political independence from their colonial rulers and establishing their own bourgeois nationalist regimes, the white settlers in Southern Rhodesia held out against black majority rule. In 1965 the Smith government unilaterally declared its independence from

Britain.

The sanctions that followed independence led to the economic isolation of the country, tight state controls over the economy and dependence on buccaneering outfits like Tiny Rowland's Lonrho Corporation. Opposition came from increasingly militant nationalist organisations: the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) led by Joshua Nkomo and strong among the Ndebele people; and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), later led by Mugabe, which became the focus for the Shona people.

In 1979 the Smith government was forced to accept a deal worked out at Lancaster House in London, and Mugabe's ZANU party swept to power in the 1980 elections. While Nkomo and other ZAPU leaders joined Mugabe's cabinet, they were dismissed in the mid-1980s when the army ruthlessly suppressed the opposition in Matabeleland.

Soon after independence, the government retreated behind the same economic controls as the Smith regime, restricting imports and the movement of foreign exchange. The increased military spending on the internal war against the Ndebele and the external war in Mozambique, and health and other social services led to huge government debts equivalent to 10 percent of GDP.

In 1990 the government was forced to abandon the protection of its domestic economy in return for foreign aid, introduce an economic structural adjustment programme (ESAP), trade liberalisation and privatisation of state owned enterprises. The ESAP has been nothing more than the organised looting and pillage of the country on behalf of international finance capital.

A huge balance of payments crisis and a 40 percent devaluation followed. Repeated droughts and famine led to the further impoverishment of the masses, re-igniting the land question as only the commercial farmers had access to irrigation. In 1997 the trade deficit reached US\$700 million, equivalent to 9 percent of GDP. Increased borrowing from the IMF and commercial banks means that total debt is now 57 percent of GDP. The level of interest payments and repayment of old debt means that net inflows are barely positive.



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