Tensions grow between Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF government and MDC opposition

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Five people have been killed and several seriously injured in clashes, as supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF party stepped up their occupations of white-owned farms in Zimbabwe. Violence has escalated in the past two weeks, since ZANU-PF supporters wielding clubs and iron bars attacked a march through the capital Harare organised by the opposition National Constitutional Assembly (NCA). The NCA—a coalition of politicians, church groups, academics and others opposed to the ZANU-PF regime—is dominated by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

Much of the recent violence has centred on white-owned farms belonging to leading MDC members. The attack on last weekend's march also singled out whites. ZANU-PF has pushed the land issue to the fore in the run-up to parliamentary elections scheduled for next month, and regards the promise of land reform as a means of winning back lost support amongst Zimbabwe's rural masses. The farm occupations began at the end of February, after the defeat of ZANU-PF in a referendum on a new constitution, which sought to strengthen Robert Mugabe's grip on the presidency by allowing him to stand for another two terms. Although Mugabe had added a clause empowering the government to seize land held by white farmers and demanding that the British government pay compensation, this failed to convince voters to support the referendum.

Over half the land in Zimbabwe, more than 45 million acres, is owned by a mere 3 percent of the population, predominantly whites. About 4,000 white-owned farms take up 70 percent of the prime farming land, while the majority black population are left with areas of low fertility. This gross inequality is a legacy of the colonial period, when white settlers under Cecil Rhodes seized the country and took the best land for themselves. Further dispossessions took place after the Second World War when demobilised British officers were encouraged to settle in what was then called Rhodesia.

Mugabe could not convince the rural masses that he was serious about land reform because he has lived with this situation for 20 years. Having fought an armed struggle against British-backed white minority governments since the 1960s, Mugabe came to power in 1980, claiming to be a Marxist. His ZANU-PF government immediately ended all pretensions to socialism, declaring that it would "accept the capitalist base of the Rhodesian economy with 'modifications in a gradual way' without seizure of private property or blanket nationalisation."

The Lancaster House agreement, the deal with Britain establishing Zimbabwe as an independent country, allowed for the Harare government to acquire land from white farmers only on the "willing seller/willing buyer" principle for the first 10 years after independence. This provision was little used because Mugabe did not want to threaten the profitability of the white-owned tobacco farms that are one of Zimbabwe's main export earners.

Recently, the state redistributed about 270 farms formerly owned by whites, but these did not go to the rural poor. They were given to just 400 people, all leading ZANU-PF figures, who include the attorney general, the mines and tourism minister, the speaker of parliament, two high court judges and a retired general. When poor black farmers attempted to occupy three farms over a year ago, Mugabe's government sent riot police to drive them out.

Mugabe has raised the issue of land redistribution too late to win spontaneous approval and so has resorted to strong-arm tactics. Although it is claimed that veterans of the war against the white regime have carried out the farm occupations, only an estimated 15 percent are actual veterans. Most of the occupiers are unemployed youth whom ZANU-PF pays Z$50 (83p) a day. Mugabe recently gave the war veterans' £330,000 to finance their campaign.

ZANU-PF ministers have blamed their referendum defeat on the MDC and claim that white farmers forced their workers to vote against the new constitution. But the widespread nature of the opposition to Mugabe can hardly be explained by the existence of wealthy white farmers, who until the last two or three years enjoyed the support of Mugabe's rule and profited from it. The real causes lie in the economic crisis that is engulfing Zimbabwe, driving the mass of the population into poverty, as well as the social changes that have taken place since independence, undermining ZANU-PF's rural base of support. Scratching a pittance on a small farm holds few attractions for youth that have flocked to the towns looking for work, where they have tended to lose their tribal allegiances and begun to identify with other workers.

In 1991 Mugabe called in the IMF, and the Zimbabwean government accepted a structural adjustment programme to deal with their debt. Although the country had a budget deficit, it did not have an unsustainable foreign debt like many other sub-Saharan African countries. The private sector economy grew in the first half of the 90s, particularly in manufacturing, reaching a peak GDP growth of 7.3 percent in 1996. However, government earnings fell and government debt actually increased as the result of cutting taxes and giving tax breaks to business, as the IMF prescribed.

From 1997 onwards loss of export earnings from agriculture and mining plunged the economy into a sharp decline. In just over a year, the value of the Zimbabwean dollar fell against the American dollar from Z$11 to just over Z$38. Inflation increased from 19 percent in 1997 to over 60 percent in 1999.

Forced to go to the IMF again in order to pay their foreign creditors, the Zimbabwean government was faced with impossible terms. The

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IMF demanded that 14,000 public sector jobs must go, that there should be further reductions in health and education spending following the already savage cuts of the early 1990s, and that the army should pull out of the Congo war, which was costing an estimated one million US dollars a day.

If Mugabe cut off the lucrative earnings that the generals were making from their incursion into the Congo, he risked destroying his own political base and a military coup.

By the end of 1999 the IMF cut off all funds to Zimbabwe. Private lenders followed suit, bringing the economy to the brink of collapse. For the majority of the population this has meant even greater levels of unemployment and poverty, and long queues for petrol and other basic commodities, boosting illusions in the MDC and their call for "change".

Whether Mugabe survives beyond May's elections remains to be seen. But if he does, or the MDC replaces him and brings the country back into the IMF fold, there will be more savage attacks on workers' living standards and deeper cuts in the public sector.

The MDC was set up last year by trade union bureaucrats, previously leaders of the NCA, who saw the possibility of creating an electoral alliance to topple Mugabe. It calls for a crash program of privatisation, the slashing of public spending and opening up of the economy to international capital investment. This program has the support of a coalition of white and black businessmen, with the trade union bureaucracy playing a key role in selling it to the masses.

The MDC's slogan "Let's change things" is an attempt to mobilise support on the basis of discontent with the Mugabe regime. Its leader Morgan Tsvangirai is the secretary general of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trades Unions. He claims that the economic dislocation caused by the IMF structural adjustment programme is the result of a "failure of administration not policy". In his speeches to rallies, he promises to address the poverty and unemployment that daily confront the mass of the population. But he makes clear to foreign reporters that he supports the IMF programme.

The April 11 *Guardian* wrote of the MDC, “White support is proving crucial to the opposition. The party will not say how much money it has raised, or from where. But the head of its campaign in Mashonal and West's 10 constituencies, Duke du Coudray, concedes that a significant proportion of campaign funds comes from white-owned businesses.”

Noting that three of the top four positions on the party's executive are held by whites, it cited du Coudray's explanation: "There's only one reason we whites are so visible.... The mass of this party is black but the black bourgeoisie is afraid to take a public stand.”

The MDC's “Stabilisation and Recovery Program” promises to “reduce all non-essential government expenditure and restructure government itself”, to implement “fast track privatisation of all government-controlled business entities and the contracting out of many government functions to the private sector”, and provide “supply side incentives that will entice the private sector to undertake [previously state-run] activities”.

Its land policy is based not only on the preservation of white ownership of the best farming areas, but the break-up of communal land and encouraging the spread of private ownership. MDC's version of “redistribution of land” is to take over “6-7 million ha [hectares] of land for resettlement through the acquisition of under-utilised, derelict and multiple owned [i.e. communal] land.” To do this it pledges to “relocate and resettle 200,000 households in communal areas”, while introducing “freehold title in communal and resettlement areas, to enlarge the land to be used as security to attract much needed investments”. This policy would benefit a thin layer of better-off blacks in the countryside, while herding hundreds of thousands of the rural poor into undeveloped, substandard state farms.

The trade union leaders boast of their “long record of effective administration and organisation”. This is to be utilised in order to curb any expressions of political independence or social opposition amongst working people. The MDC promises to “halt the current passive labour market approach, and actively pursue employment-intensive growth and an employment policy co-ordinated by a Tripartite [government, employers and unions] Labour Market Commission”.

It is this program that has won the MDC the political backing of Zimbabwe's former colonial rulers, Britain. There have also been accusations made that America's International Republican Institute sponsors the MDC.

Mugabe has demagogically threatened to "go to war" with Britain, in response to clear attempts by London to destabilise his regime. Last autumn at the Commonwealth Conference, Prime Minister Blair publicly criticised the Zimbabwean government for not controlling the country's AIDS epidemic, which has resulted in one in four of the population being HIV positive. Relations between London and Harare deteriorated further when Zimbabwean customs officials opened a crate labelled as British diplomatic baggage, hoping to find material destined for the opposition MDC. Foreign Office Minister for Africa Peter Hain stated, "This is not the act of a civilised country." Hain, who was born in Kenya and brought up in South Africa, cut his political teeth in the anti-apartheid movement. He knows Africa well and such a remark by him, echoing the language of the white racist regime in South Africa and British colonialism, is a calculated insult.

As the land occupations escalated, the British government let it be known that it had made arrangements to airlift 20,000 British passport holders out of Zimbabwe. Hain declared, "This sort of thuggery, licensed from on high, is dragging Zimbabwe's already tainted name through the mud."

Britain fears that Mugabe is managing Zimbabwe's economy in the interests of his own cronies, rather than those of international capital. It is also concerned at the disintegration of the Congo since the fall of Mobutu, the dictator imposed by America during the Cold War. Zimbabwe has the infrastructure to exploit the Congo's minerals and could provide a gateway into this rich region where Zimbabwe's army is currently propping up Mobutu's embattled successor, Laurent Kabila, and has seized control of the largest diamond-mining complex in Africa at Mbuji Mayi, as well as the vast copper and cobalt operations in Katanga. British capitalists have longstanding interests in the Congo, where they covertly backed the breakaway Katanga province in the 1960s.

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