

Narrow victory for Mugabe in Zimbabwean elections sets stage for further upheavals

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The majority vote for the ruling Zimbabwean National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government in last weekend's parliamentary elections represents a setback for Britain and the United States. The openly expressed desire of the Western powers was that the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) would sweep to victory and pave the way for the ouster of ZANU-PF President Robert Mugabe.

Mugabe's presidential term continues for a further two years, and with a ZANU-PF majority in the new parliament, he has a legal mandate to maintain power. ZANU-PF won 62 of the 120 directly elected seats, against the MDC's 57. Since Mugabe gets to appoint a further 30 seats in the 150-member parliament, ZANU-PF will continue to control the parliament, although by a narrow margin. In previous parliamentary elections only three non-ZANU-PF candidates were elected.

Voter turnout was 65 percent—the highest since the first post-independence elections of 1980. Western observers were surprised by the large vote, primarily the result of a heavy turnout in the countryside.

The elections exposed deep divisions between the urban areas, which voted overwhelmingly for the MDC, and the rural population, where ZANU-PF won 90 percent of the vote in many constituencies. This is to be explained by a number of factors, all of which combine to create a highly volatile situation within the country.

Mugabe focused his campaign on attacks on the tiny caste of white landowners who control the majority of arable land, and on Britain and other Western governments that openly supported the MDC. His efforts to exploit the grievances of the rural masses clearly struck a chord. MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai, for example, was defeated in his rural constituency, while Chenjerai Hunzvi, leader of the ZANU-PF-backed war veterans who have occupied hundreds of white-owned farms, won a parliamentary seat by a large vote in his countryside constituency.

The initial reaction of the Western powers to the election result was a mixture of disappointment and confusion. Britain, in particular, had anticipated that the MDC would win a majority of parliamentary seats. At the same time it and other Western governments had mounted a media campaign in the run-up to the vote accusing ZANU-PF of systematic repression against the MDC and its supporters.

Speaking while the votes were still being counted, British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook declared, "The voting rolls were rigged, the boundaries were rigged and there was systematic brutality intended to deter people from voting for change." If Mugabe refused to accept MDC representatives into his cabinet, "there would be consequences", Cook threatened.

While Mugabe's forces undoubtedly resorted to scattered violence and intimidation, the scale of such actions was exaggerated by the Western powers. At the same time, reports of violence by MDC forces against ZANU-PF supporters went largely unreported in the Western media.

The MDC was able to hold campaign rallies attended by tens of thousands, and the actual ballot was conducted without major incident. The number of deaths attributed to campaign violence prior to the

election, 33, was a relatively small number compared to previous elections in Zimbabwe.

In the aftermath of the vote, Britain's Labour government and its counterparts in Europe and America did not dispute the validity of the election or its results. They apparently resigned themselves to a more long-term approach.

On Tuesday, June 27, Mugabe called for reconciliation and signalled his willingness to bring MDC representatives into his cabinet. Cook gave a favourable response—saying that the time was right for "national reconciliation in Zimbabwe". A similar sentiment was expressed by the *Financial Times* of London, which had earlier opposed any conciliation towards Mugabe and ZANU-PF.

Tsvangirai indicated that his party would not accept Mugabe's offer of seats in cabinet, but added that this was not the "time for partisanship". It appears that the MDC will seek to isolate Mugabe by cultivating relations with those sections of the governing party most receptive to Western demands, while preparing for the 2002 presidential elections, which Tsvangirai says he will contest.

Cook's ultimatums to Zimbabwe are stunning in their hypocrisy and arrogance. He speaks as the political representative of an imperialist nation which has brutally oppressed the people of the region for over a century. Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) was only established as an independent nation after 15 years of civil war against the British-backed white supremacist regime of Ian Smith. In recent years, Britain has played a leading role in efforts by the major powers and the International Monetary Fund to wreck Zimbabwe's economy and destabilise its government.

The Zimbabwean economy was deliberately rendered dysfunctional after sharp falls in export earnings from 1997 onwards drove the country ever deeper into debt. ZANU-PF had agreed in 1991 to an IMF structural adjustment programme that privatised state-owned services, attacked living standards and slashed public spending, but the Western powers concluded that Mugabe had not gone far enough. In November last year the IMF and the major banks suspended all funding and credit to Zimbabwe, and Britain and the US froze all aid.

Last year, Britain and the US were instrumental in setting up the MDC and cultivating it as their preferred vehicle for defending their interests in Zimbabwe. The MDC is heavily funded by the Zimbabwe Democracy Trust (ZDT), a group of powerful British and US politicians and businessmen, which includes former British Foreign Secretaries Malcolm Rifkind, Douglas Hurd and Geoffrey Howe, and former US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker. The mining corporation Anglo-American, the Australian mining company BHP (of which Rifkind is a director), and Ashanti Gold Fields (of which Crocker is a director), all with interests in Zimbabwe, back the ZDT.

Led by the secretary general of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trades Unions, the MDC found a popular response, especially in the urban areas, due to widespread hostility to Mugabe's regime, which is rife with

corruption and has protected the pre-independence white landowning class, while benefiting only a narrow layer of black bourgeois elements. The MDC's economic programme, however, echoes the demands of Western governments and the IMF. It calls for sweeping fast-track privatisations, opening up of the economy to international investors, drastic cuts in the public sector and the repayment of all outstanding debts.

Three of the top four positions on the MDC's executive are held by wealthy white farmers and businessmen. Its land policy is based on the preservation of white ownership of the best farming areas, while encouraging the development of black-owned private farms through government assistance. This could only benefit a thin layer of the more wealthy rural population, particularly given that security of tenure is to be granted only to those with "the required technical and other [i.e. financial] support required for viability."

Mugabe responded to the imperialist-backed challenge to his rule by appealing to the anger and frustration of the rural peasants and poor, seeking to mobilise them as a counterweight to the MDC and its British and American sponsors. Last February Mugabe held a referendum on a new constitution that would have sanctioned the seizure of hundreds of white-owned farms without compensation and allowed him to serve another two terms as president. He lost the referendum vote, primarily due to a low turnout in the countryside—his traditional base.

With his back to the wall, Mugabe upped the ante by sponsoring land occupations led by the organisation of civil war veterans, combined with a propaganda campaign denouncing "whites" and foreign powers. Mugabe gambled that raising the issue of land ownership would give pause to the major powers, because it threatened vital commercial interests throughout the African continent, where various regimes have preserved Western control of mining, manufacturing and large-scale agriculture. Britain opened talks with Zimbabwe for a number of weeks, but the talks collapsed and Britain resumed its political offensive against ZANU-PF.

Mugabe hesitated in announcing a date for the scheduled parliamentary elections, which provoked new denunciations and threats from the West. Once Mugabe set the date, the MDC, after initially considering a boycott, decided, under Western pressure, to participate. This set the stage for the two-pronged propaganda offensive by the US and European governments and media—portraying the MDC as a grass roots democratic resistance, and charging Mugabe with a systematic and violent campaign to suppress MDC candidates and rig the vote.

Mugabe's pretensions to advance an anti-imperialist program and articulate the strivings of the rural poor for land and social justice are entirely bogus. In 1979 he used the considerable support that his guerrilla army had built up in rural areas, based on promises that the land would be taken back from the white colonialists, to bring the civil war against Smith to an end.

In the Lancaster House Agreement of 1979 that ended the civil war, British and US investments were protected in return for establishing the rule of a narrow layer of ZANU-PF functionaries and businessmen. That agreement was reached only after Mugabe pledged to preserve the control of gold mining operations by British and other multinational corporations, and to abstain from encroaching on the interests of white landowners for 10 years, and then to take over land only on a "willing seller" basis, with full compensation to the previous owners.

For the next two decades Mugabe kept his promises to London. At present some 4,000 white-owned farms comprise 70 percent of the prime farming land, while the majority black population are left to eke out a living on undeveloped scrub-land. More than six million rural poor are crowded into barren communal areas. The few land transfers that have taken place have gifted the most fertile land to ZANU-PF officials and their relatives. As late as 1997, government ministers were shouted down at a war veterans' meeting because of their failure to redistribute the land.

Mugabe's government fell foul of the Western powers only because they

were no longer prepared, in the post-Cold War era, to give his regime the limited room for manoeuvre it once enjoyed. He was driven into a conflict with the West because the new demands they were making on him could not be carried through without risking the collapse of his regime.

One of the IMF's key demands was for Mugabe to end Zimbabwe's military ventures into the Congo and his support for the Kabila regime. But his generals were earning substantial amounts from the war by looting the Congo's diamond reserves.

At the same time Mugabe's base of support in the countryside was weakening amidst growing urban industrial unrest, culminating in three general strikes last year. Thus Mugabe felt obliged to raise the question of land ownership in response to a combination of domestic opposition and Western provocation.

For all his anti-white and anti-imperialist demagoguery, Mugabe is well aware of certain lines that cannot be crossed. At one point during his election campaign he threatened to extend the farm occupations to mines owned by foreign companies. The following day he made a grovelling retraction, promising, "There won't be any seizure, never, ever of gold mines." He added, "What we would want to pursue is the policy of empowerment and get our multinational companies to open up to some of the black entrepreneurs."

Neither of the two main contenders in the elections offers any means of resolving the fundamental social and political problems of the Zimbabwean people. Fully 72 percent of the population live in poverty and most are under the age of 40, due to the high death rate in a situation where at least a quarter of the population is infected with HIV/AIDS. Unemployment is now over 50 percent. Inflation stands at well over 60 percent and continues to rise. The country has little fuel or electricity, foreign reserves or credit and the West will in all probability maintain its blockade in order to further its political schemes.

In these circumstances, there is a serious danger that the legitimate grievances of the rural poor could be channelled against the working class. Such is the general thrust of the tactics employed by Mugabe and ZANU-PF.

The Western media has largely focused on the misfortunes of rich farmers during the land seizures, but only three of those killed were whites. The majority of the people killed by the war veterans were black farm labourers, part of Zimbabwe's 350,000-450,000 agricultural workers. ZANU-PF thugs also targeted teachers in cities to be stripped and beaten.

Speaking after the elections, Mugabe's top political adviser, Jonathan Moyo, told Britain's *Independent* newspaper that workers in the cities "voted for the MDC, so now we consider them the MDC's responsibility. The MDC just does not know what a problem they have created for themselves by promising change to the volatile urban areas. The MDC says it wants an austerity package—that is what we will give their supporters, because they have given us the latitude to give them the bitter pill."

Any success Mugabe has had in pitting the peasants and rural poor against the working class, however, must also be laid at the feet of the Western powers and their allies in the leadership of the MDC—most particularly the trade unions, which form the core of the so-called democratic opposition. Insofar as the labour movement is identified with the IMF, the British and the white landowners, the conditions are created for Mugabe and his lieutenants to channel the anger of the rural poor against the workers. As the experience of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in Cambodia demonstrated, such rural-based movements against the cities can take on a terrible aspect.



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