Zimbabwe: Relations between MDC opposition and Mugabe deteriorate

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Opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai said last month that Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe should step down from office or “we will remove you violently”. Tsvangirai was speaking at a rally celebrating the first anniversary of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which he heads.

Ministers of the ruling ZANU-PF party accused Tsvangirai, who travelled to South Africa in the days following his September 30 speech, of treason. They demanded his arrest when he returned to Zimbabwe. Tsvangirai compared Mugabe to Yugoslavia's Slobodan Milosevic and said that if he (Tsvangirai) was arrested he would “not be responsible for the reactions of the people.... A similar situation [to Yugoslavia] cannot be avoided.”

The MDC's Western backers hope that a movement can be manufactured in Zimbabwe to remove Mugabe similar to the one they fostered in Serbia to topple Milosevic. In the June poll, ZANU-PF only narrowly held on to power, with the MDC taking 57 out of 120 parliamentary seats, despite a campaign of intimidation organised by the government in the run-up to the election in which over 30 people were killed.

Since the elections, Western hopes that Mugabe and his government would accept some compromise with the MDC, or that Mugabe would gracefully withdraw from the presidential elections due in 2002, have failed to materialise. The West and the MDC are now seeking to escalate internal tensions—as witnessed in Tsvangirai's speech-as well as withdrawing all aid and loans, in a situation where the economy is already on the brink of collapse.

In the event, the Zimbabwean government avoided responding to Tsvangirai in a way that could have brought the masses out on the streets. There were some demonstrations when three MDC MPs were arrested on charges of inciting violence. But after Tsvangirai flew back to Zimbabwe, he was only summoned briefly by the police for questioning and then set free. The three MPs were released later.

Tsvangirai and the MDC have come under increasing criticism from the pro-Western press in Zimbabwe that has previously backed them. The *Zimbabwe Independent* said that Tsvangirai's statement regarding violence “plays into the hands of a violence-prone ZANU-PF”, and that “Tsvangirai's propensity for disastrous tactical errors, and the MDC's thinness on ideology and principles, could spell havoc for the party in a heel-to-heel fight with ZANU-PF, whether the election was free and fair or not.” A comment in the *Zimbabwe Standard* said that the MDC had “merely ridden on the coattails of public disgruntlement”, but that apart from repeated calls for “mass action” the party lacked a “post-ZANU-PF vision we can latch on to”.

The problem facing the MDC and its erstwhile supporters is not just its inexperience compared with Mugabe and ZANU-PF, but how to sell its pro-IMF programme to the mass of the population. In the face of mounting poverty and unemployment, its policy of privatisation and public sector retrenchment is hardly compatible with “vision” and “principles”.

Mugabe has not held on to power in Zimbabwe simply by using the state machine to intimidate his opponents. ZANU-PF was able to maintain support in the rural areas by organising land occupations, in which hundreds of large agribusinesses owned by a tiny minority of rich white farmers were seized and given to the landless poor. Despite the opportunist nature of this manoeuvre—Mugabe had previously enjoyed good relations with the white farmers over the 20 years since independence—it gained support amongst the millions of

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peasants who had been driven on to the poorest land by the colonial settlers over the previous century. In contrast, the MDC says that it supports land reform but only if it is “orderly” and “lawful”. In practice, given the absence of government funds to buy back land, this means that nothing would be done to undermine the position of the white farmers, many of whom support the MDC.

At the same time as Tsvangirai was delivering his “violence” speech, an attempt was made by Western-backed pro-MDC entrepreneurs to set up Capital Radio. As one of the directors, Carol Jackson, explained, “In Zimbabwe, radio is the only medium that reaches rural areas. It was the rural vote that stopped Mugabe getting thrown out at the last election. We wanted to set up a soft-rock music station, but we also wanted to provide independent news.” Capital Radio pursued its right to broadcast through the courts and was successful. However this attempt to bypass state propaganda was quickly blocked by Mugabe, who used his presidential powers and sent in the police to close it down on October 4.

Whether Mugabe can continue to muster support in rural areas by promising to seize land remains to be seen. In August the government said it intended to resettle peasants on 800 farms before the start of the rainy season in November. But so far only around 200 farms have been taken over and the government has evicted squatters who took over land themselves after the launch of its resettlement scheme in July. Whatever manoeuvres Mugabe and the ZANU-PF leaders develop in opposition to Western efforts to usurp their rule, their days are numbered. Before the economic problems of the past two or three years, Mugabe had followed IMF demands and was highly regarded by Britain and the West. His nationalist politics, despite occasional anti-imperialist rhetoric, served the interests of a small elite and allowed international investors to dominate the economy. Mugabe only incurred the wrath of Western governments when he refused IMF demands to cut public spending further and to withdraw troops from the Congo, measures which would have undermined his ruling clique.

The IMF broke off relations with the Zimbabwean government last year, and many Western donors suspended aid to the country. Last week the World Bank suspended all loans to Zimbabwe because it had failed to meet its debt-servicing obligations. It will now be very difficult for Zimbabwe to raise finance, in a situation where the government has overspent its budget by more than 20 percent, interest rates have reached 60 percent and inflation is over 50 percent. Gross Domestic Product is expected to shrink by 5 percent this year. One half of the working population are unemployed and three quarters of the population live in poverty, according to UN figures.

Whilst this dire situation can be partially attributed to Western pressure put on Zimbabwe over the last year, fundamentally it is the result of IMF-World Bank policies over the last decade, policies that Mugabe went along with. As throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa, demands to repay loans and to slash public spending, while falling commodity prices cut export earnings, have driven Zimbabwe's economy to the point of collapse. Mugabe has no answer to this economic impasse—his finance minister Simba Makoni has now been reduced to pleading for international aid to stave off complete collapse.

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