

Why the MDC opposition in Zimbabwe fell for a transparent sting operation

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The Zimbabwean Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is contesting the forthcoming presidential elections with its candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai. Since its foundation three years ago the MDC has achieved widespread popular support, especially in the urban areas, because of the growing opposition to President Robert Mugabe's autocratic rule through his Zanu-PF party.

From the outset workers have been misled by the MDC's populist denunciations of government corruption and economic incompetence into thinking that the new party would defend their interests. But the aim of the MDC is to win the support and approval of the Western powers. It was launched with the backing of western organisations like the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Zimbabwe Democratic Trust. Its programme is based on the IMF's restructuring proposals and includes "the privatisation of all parastatal activity within two years" and involving the private sector "in all areas of the provision of infrastructure".

Mugabe's response to the MDC's challenge has been to mount a campaign of violence, using the so-called war veterans not only against white farmers and their black employees in the country, but against any form of political opposition in the towns. This has included attacks on newspapers and assaults and murders of MDC members and supporters.

Numerous claims have been made of assassination plots against Mugabe by the MDC. On 13 February 2002, Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) screened an hour-long documentary *Dateline* programme, which included eight-and-a-half minutes of secretly filmed video footage purporting to show a meeting in which Tsvangirai discussed a murder plot against Mugabe.

The documentary filmmaker, Mark Davis, states that the meeting took place in Montreal, Canada on December 4 last year. He said that a Canadian firm of political consultants, Dickens and Madson, were offered \$500,000 (£350,000) plus further substantial sums if they carried out the assassination.

The video footage was blurred and it was impossible to positively identify any of the six individuals at the meeting (three were out of shot). Dickens and Madson claim that their company president, Ari Ben-Menashe, and two employees were present. Besides Tsvangirai, there were also an American and a Briton—both unidentified.

Ben-Menashe, a former Israeli intelligence agent, is heard to say, "The MDC represented by the top man who's sitting here right now commits to, let's call it whatever you want to call it, the coup d'état or elimination of the president." And later, "OK, Mr Mugabe is eliminated. Now what?"

Dickens and Madson later admitted that they were "lobbyists" for the Zimbabwe government. Ben-Menashe claims he first met Tsvangirai last summer in London, through a British-South African dual national. He said of Tsvangirai, "What he didn't know was that we had a relationship with Mr Mugabe that dated back quite a few years. So he knocked on the wrong door."

The MDC claim Dickens and Madson had approached them and "said that it wanted to help build MDC's image abroad but mainly in North America where Mugabe was said to be winning the propaganda war through his lobbyist group Cohen and Woods." Tsvangirai admits that the meeting in Montreal did take place and that he was there. Three previous meetings had been held in London. According to Tsvangirai, at the Montreal meeting Ben-Menashe and his team "from nowhere introduced discussion around the issue of

elimination and kept on asking strange questions.”

He later told the Associated Press news agency that the tape was “contrived” and part of a crude smear campaign.

It seems likely that Tsvangirai was indeed caught in a “sting” operation, but why did he fall for it and engage in several meetings with people who by his own admission kept raising the possibility of political assassinations? There is a situation of extreme violence and intimidation inside Zimbabwe. The leader of the MDC, who is also its presidential candidate, attended four meetings with a dubious group of power-brokers, lobbyists and political provocateurs whom he must have known had past relations with Mugabe, disregarding concern about the security of MDC’s operations and the safety of its personnel.

Tsvangirai claims that it was only after the fourth meeting that the MDC “then carried out a research to ascertain the background and possible motive of Mr Ben-Menashe and his company in initiating dialogue with us.” The Internet is brimming over with articles, reviews, statements and even affidavits about the history and background of Ben-Menashe. On his own evidence he worked for Israeli Military Intelligence between August 1977 and September 1987. In 1992 he published a book, *Profits of War* in which he claims that in 1987 he had access to top-secret files on Israel’s history and capabilities as a nuclear power.

Ben-Menashe also seems to have played some role in the Iran-Contra affair. In 1990 a New York federal jury acquitted him of charges that he had illegally sold Israeli-owned Hercules aircraft to Iran. He said that the sale was part of a US-sanctioned deal to win the release of American hostages held by Iran.

In another *Dateline* programme screened in Australia on 31 October 2001, Ben-Menashe was described as “someone who moves through the city as a commodities trader and political consultant to several African and South American nations”. Journalist Bob Parry said he had seen three letters of reference signed by Israeli military officers verifying that Ben-Menashe had played an important role in various activities of military intelligence, “holding key positions responsible for a variety of complex and sensitive assignments”. Previously, however, the Israelis had said he was a fraud.

Despite all of this freely available information,

Tsvangirai and the MDC fell for Dickens and Madson’s bait—that his company could “bridge the communications gap abroad but mainly in North America.” For the MDC, the possibility of gaining a favourable hearing in US ruling circles encouraged them to throw caution to the wind. It is entirely possible, moreover, that the company’s past connections with Zanu-PF were known to the MDC and that they regarded the approach as a sign that key supporters and members of Mugabe’s coterie might be considering switching sides.

Tsvangirai is a former general secretary of the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions. But rather than defending the interests of the millions of Zimbabwean workers or landless poor in the countryside, his main concern is to impress Western investors and governments impatient to get their hands on the resources of the whole of southern Africa, including Zimbabwe. That was why he seized the opportunity to make a deal with Dickens and Madson.

The effect of Tsvangirai and the MDC’s dalliance with this dubious company has been to expose those sections of workers and intellectuals who have wrongly placed their political trust in the MDC to further repressive measures by the Mugabe regime.



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