

Western powers dispute Mugabe's victory in Zimbabwe poll

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The ruling ZANU-PF Party of President Robert Mugabe increased its share of parliamentary seats in elections held last week that were widely condemned in the West as rigged. ZANU-PF won 78 seats out of a possible 120, whereas the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) won only 41 seats—17 fewer than it won in 2000.

Criticism in the Western media focused on the refusal of Zimbabwe's government to allow international observers from the European Union and the Commonwealth to monitor the poll. Observers from the African Union, South Africa and other southern African countries claimed that the elections were “free and credible,” and voting apparently proceeded without much violence, unlike elections in 2000 and 2002.

The largest group of election observers, from the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), rejected the conclusion of southern African observers and pointed to a “climate of fear” over a long period before the poll. They cited rural areas hit by drought where government food aid was used to gain votes, as well as no-go areas where opposition parties were kept out. However, they welcomed the predominantly peaceful conditions on polling day and the reduced violence in the immediate run-up to the election.

The Western powers dismissed the election, with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice claiming they were “heavily tilted in the government's favour,” and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw condemning them as “seriously flawed.”

The intention of the US and Britain is to step up their pressure on a regime that Rice has called an “outpost of tyranny.” Rice's list of complaints against Mugabe, including muzzling the press and constraining freedom of assembly, are applied very selectively. They could just as easily be directed against countries that meet US approval—from Nigeria to Pakistan—and certainly to the

recent elections in Iraq, which were conducted under conditions of military occupation.

Whatever the degree of election fraud, it cannot by itself explain the continuing decline of the MDC, the party the West has backed to replace Mugabe and ZANU-PF. The MDC has failed to make headway since it received a wave of popular support in the late 1990s. The call by the archbishop of Bulawayo for a Ukrainian-style “peaceful mass uprising” against the government received no response.

To some extent, the MDC's decline can be attributed to inept political leadership. The British *Independent* newspaper, normally favorable to the MDC, noted that the organisation is in crisis following the elections. There have been calls for its leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, to resign. Last September, he called for an election boycott, only to change his mind this February, with the result that many MDC voters, especially in the rural areas, failed to register.

However, a more important factor in the MDC's decline is the party's policies and its open ties to Western imperialist governments. As the *Independent* admits, the MDC has failed to capitalise on spiraling inflation, widespread unemployment and food shortages, under conditions in which the economy has contracted by 30 percent since 2000. Some 3 million people have emigrated from the country in recent years, and the decline in food production in what was once a key agricultural economy in southern Africa has resulted in large sections of the population facing starvation and becoming dependent on aid.

The MDC has blamed the economic collapse on the ZANU-PF regime. This is partly true. Mugabe's land seizures have played a part in the economic collapse because none of the inputs and infrastructure needed for successful agricultural production were provided by the cash-strapped government. Some small farmers and

landless peasants have received plots of land, but much of it has gone to wealthy government supporters.

Mugabe claimed a bumper harvest last year and demanded that international food donors halt feeding programmes. The reality, even according to the state-run Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee (ZimVAC), is that at least 3.3 million of the rural population were unable to obtain the food they needed between December 2004 and March 2005.

But the MDC has nothing progressive to offer as an alternative for the rural poor and landless, or the vast numbers of poor and unemployed workers in the cities. Its manifesto is shaped entirely in the interests of the imperialist powers and international financial institutions, whose domination of the world economy and exploitation of its resources is fundamentally responsible for the continuing backwardness and underdevelopment of Zimbabwe.

The MDC's commitment to International Monetary Fund-style "sound fiscal and monetary policies" will please international financiers and Western governments but provides no basis for carrying out its promised relief to poor farmers and the unemployed. According to the *Independent*, "Its open door approach to international financial institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, did not play well with an electorate that has painful memories of the 'structural adjustment' of the 1990s."

The MDC is advocating the same "free market" policies that Mugabe followed in the 1990s, and which gave rise to a growing number of strikes and protest movements. Mugabe was forced to halt the IMF programme, as he risked undermining his system of patronage in ZANU-PF if he carried through the drastic cuts in state expenditure demanded. It was because of this shift that Mugabe went from being highly regarded by Britain and the US in the 1980s and early 1990s, for having agreed to end the armed struggle against the white supremacist regime in 1979, to his present pariah status.

Today, the overtly pro-imperialist policies of the MDC alienate vast swathes of workers and poor peasants, and allow Mugabe to adopt an anti-colonialist posture, portraying his government as the defender of Zimbabwe against Western-backed stooges. This carries some weight amongst sections of voters.

The MDC was formed by trade union bureaucrats, businessmen and academics, who sought thereby to both exploit and channel the wave of protest that erupted before the 2000 elections. The new party focused on Mugabe's authoritarian rule. But its underlying pro-

Western economic policies, its funding by wealthy white farmers, and its support from institutions like the Friedrich Ebert Institute are now widely known.

It is this, combined with Mugabe's ability to maintain control of ZANU-PF, the army and security forces—no dissident grouping within his party feels it can risk association with an overtly pro-Western movement like the MDC—that has encouraged the South African ANC government to back Mugabe's continued rule.

As the South African newspaper *Business Day* explains, President Mbeki's policy of "quiet diplomacy" towards Zimbabwe relates directly to the consideration that an "MDC government would not have the means to control the army, the police and the all-powerful Central Intelligence Organisation [This] would create instability right on our northern border."

Nevertheless, Mugabe's grip on ZANU-PF is increasingly unstable, and his base of support is growing ever narrower. Last December, Mugabe's information minister, Professor Jonathan Moyo—the man whose responsibility was to suppress all opposition press—was sacked and accused of organising a coup.

Moyo had called a meeting to organise support for Emmerson Mnangagwa as vice-president of ZANU-PF, and hence successor to Mugabe. Mnangagwa, formerly Mugabe's closest aide, was responsible for the repression in the Matabeleland region in the 1980s that killed tens of thousands. He is supported by big business and has some support in South Africa. Moyo stood as an independent in the election and was voted back in, so he presumably will continue to build up opposition to Mugabe.

In removing all potential opponents in ZANU-PF, Mugabe has given all top jobs to one clan grouping—a break from the previous policy of balancing the various clan factions. This is likely to exacerbate rivalries and internal conflicts.



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