

# Zimbabwe: Resistance to Mugabe's rule deepens

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The arrest yesterday of Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the opposition Movement For Democratic Change (MDC), is the latest move in a desperate clampdown on growing opposition to the rule of President Robert Mugabe.

Tsvangirai was taken into police custody along with a number of others following a raid on the MDC's headquarters in Harare.

There are also reports that two nearby streets were sealed off, with tear gas fired at witnesses to the event.

At an anti-government rally on March 11, police subjected Tsvangirai and other MDC supporters to a severe beating, leaving him with a fractured skull and severe bruising. The results were shown to the world's media.

Up to 50 MDC leaders have been severely beaten whilst in jail, including Arthur Mutambara, leader of a breakaway faction of the MDC, and Nelson Chamisa, MDC spokesman, who was attacked by eight security men with iron bars and critically injured. Several MDC leaders have had to flee to South Africa for medical attention.

In the aftermath of the rally police hit squads are reported to be arresting and beating up opponents throughout the country. In the capital the civic group, the Combined Harare Residents Association, reported that individuals caught moving at night in the townships had been stopped by police and beaten. The *Independent* reported a phone call from a Harare resident saying that some people had "more serious injuries" than Tsvangirai.

There are signs of a growing mood of resistance, despite the attempts of MDC leaders to keep protest to a limited and peaceful nature. The BBC reports an eyewitness account of the rally on March 11. After Tsvangirai and other leaders were taken away, there were over a thousand youths protesting and only 30 police attempting to control them. After first using teargas the police started shooting and one of the protesters, Gift Tandare, was killed. After this, the eyewitness said, "We went on the rampage and we did not even fear for our lives."

The police ran for their vehicles and the six or so left behind were badly beaten. Only the intervention of a local community youth leader prevented the police from being killed.

The ZANU-PF authorities, fearing that the funeral of Gift Tandare would spark off mass opposition to the regime, stole the body and buried it without the presence of family and friends.

The United States sees the growing opposition to Mugabe as an opportunity to impose its agenda in Zimbabwe. Ambassador Christopher Dell said that opposition to Mugabe had reached "a tipping point." He detected a "new spirit of resistance—some would say defiance—on the part of the people."

He went on to praise the comments of Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank Director Dr. Gideon Gono, who had warned that inflation was now comparable to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Zimbabwe and proposed a programme of tough austerity measures.

Dell denied that the US administration wants to overthrow the

government, insisting that "for us the question is not who rules Zimbabwe, but how Zimbabwe is ruled."

His interview was a clear message to elements within the ruling ZANU-PF party that the US is willing to do business with them if they oust Mugabe and form a regime that is more directly accountable to global capital.

"It is clear that change is coming," Dell said, "it is clear that a succession is in the offing, everybody knows that the economic crisis that Zimbabwe is experiencing simply provides the backdrop for the internal dissensions within the Ruling Party; that's where the succession struggle is playing itself out right now."

When asked whether the international donors would provide economic assistance for Zimbabwe, Dell made it clear that any help was dependent on regime change. The US is "prepared to provide that helping hand but only on the basis that whoever is governing this country is clearly, demonstrably and irrevocably committed to reforms to restore the economy and democracy."

What particularly concerned Dell was Mugabe's disregard for "private property."

The UK is following the US lead closely. The *Independent* quotes an unnamed British official who explains that Britain and the Western powers would "reengage quite vigorously" with factions in ZANU-PF, and in return for limiting the violence against the opposition and moving to elections they would lift the present sanctions in place against the regime.

Another unidentified diplomat told the *Guardian*, "The feeling is that the way forward is a deal between those in ZANU-PF that want rid of Mugabe to try and save their party and those in the opposition prepared to work with them. It's the best way of bringing about swift change and if they can come to a deal, that changes everything. That is what we are working toward."

While Western governments have not given up on the MDC, they are using it essentially in order to put pressure on ZANU-PF so as to provoke a split. An alliance between the MDC and ZANU-PF would hopefully provide the major global investors and banks with a regime that could then impose drastic austerity measures on the working class and rural poor.

ZANU-PF would bring with it control of the armed forces, its continued influence in the countryside and what remains of its anti-imperialist credentials. The MDC would be a political vehicle within government for Zimbabwe's white businessmen and estate owners, while hopefully using its status as a democratic opposition to Mugabe and its influence in the trade unions to ensure the compliance of the urban working class.

The main rival factions within ZANU-PF are led by Solomon Mujuru, whose wife Joyce is vice president, and by Emmerson Mnangagwa. Both are wealthy businessmen with considerable support in the armed forces and intelligence services. British Channel Four Television filmed a secret meeting taking place last week in Johannesburg between Joyce Mujuru

and the South African vice president, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.

The fact that Western governments want to replace Mugabe with a rival faction from ZANU-PF exposes the hypocrisy of their condemnation of human rights violations in Zimbabwe. Solomon Mujuru was head of the Zimbabwean army and, as part of the ZANU-PF leadership since the 1970s, has fully supported the recent repression. So has Emmerson Mnangagwa, also part of the ZANU-PF elite and notorious for his role as minister of state security in the 1980s when more than 20,000 ethnic Ndebeles were killed to stop a threatened uprising against the Mugabe regime.

Western governments are putting pressure on neighbouring South Africa to intervene. Most vocal has been Australian Prime Minister John Howard, who criticised South Africa especially: “He [Mugabe] was a brother in arms against apartheid, I know that, but that’s a long time ago. He’s been a disaster as a leader of his country and I think there’s a very special responsibility on his neighbouring African colleagues to do things.”

Whilst the official response from South Africa has been low key, there is intense activity behind the scenes to organise a “palace coup” from within ZANU-PF. Zimbabwe is economically dependent on South Africa.

Mugabe can no longer rely on much of the police and army. A leaked confidential police memo reported wide-scale desertions by poorly paid officers and soldiers. Many of them are going to South Africa to work as security guards. Only special units that report directly to the president can be trusted to carry out the beating of oppositionists and intimidating the population. There are also reports that Mugabe is obtaining the support of around 2,500 Angolan paramilitary police as part of a bilateral deal with the Angolan government.

The description of Zimbabwe as being in a state of “meltdown” hardly does justice to the catastrophe that the population faces. Life expectancy is now the lowest in the world: 37 for men and 34 for women. These figures were obtained two years ago and the real figures could be as low as 30, with an estimated 3,500 people dying each week. The most popular organisations are burial societies that collect money for a decent funeral. As one of the few places where people are allowed to meet, these societies have become centres of political opposition.

There is a raging AIDS pandemic, with virtually no treatment available. Food shortages are widespread and thousands are going hungry with reports of poor rainfall in a situation where most people have to grow their own food. Most factories and other sources of employment have closed down and hyperinflation is running at 1,700 percent and rising. Unemployment is 80 percent and 85 percent live in poverty.

At least a million people, mainly those with professional qualifications, have fled to the West. Up to a quarter of the remaining population, over 3 million people, have fled to South Africa as illegal immigrants. The border is heavily policed and crossing the Limpopo River dangerous, but hundreds are paying people smugglers and fleeing every day.

Zimbabwe’s slide into such a disaster cannot be explained in terms of the personal failings of Mugabe, or as something that is peculiar to African politics. Mugabe led a successful liberation struggle to oust the white Rhodesian regime that was allowed to stay in power by Britain, the former colonial ruler, and the Western governments.

But his politics, characteristic of bourgeois nationalists throughout the world, led to a compromise deal, the Lancaster House agreement, with Western imperialism in 1979. Whilst Mugabe employed socialist rhetoric to win support, he did so in order to preserve capitalism and the interests of the transnational corporations and banks.

All opposition to investment by the imperialist powers was dropped. Also abandoned was the policy of nationalizing the land that had originally won ZANU its rural support. The Mugabe regime was widely praised by Western governments and as aid flowed into state-funded healthcare and education expanded.

By 1990 the Zimbabwe government accepted an International Monetary Fund Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility. The free-market measures contained in such programmes, imposed on many developing countries, were devastating. State spending had to be slashed—for example spending per person on healthcare fell by a third from 1990 to 1996, despite the AIDS pandemic—and the economy slumped, giving rise to increasing government debts. Further global competition in agriculture and falling prices of minerals resulted in severe economic decline, for which Mugabe’s nationalist policies had no answer.

Mugabe’s relations with the IMF and the Western powers became increasingly strained as the cuts in state spending being demanded hit the system of patronage on which the regime depended. By the late 1990s growing resistance from the working class led to a series of strikes, but opposition to the ZANU-PF regime was channelled into the pro-IMF MDC.

In 2000 Mugabe attempted to win back support from the landless poor by seizing farms from their white owners. Until then such larger-scale capitalist agriculture had been allowed to continue unhindered. Some of the farms were taken over by the rich ZANU-PF elite, others divided up amongst the landless. But with no state funding for investment in agricultural inputs, machinery or training a collapse in farming has resulted that has had dire consequences for the economy and the food supply.

This combination of free-market IMF measures with ZANU-PF’s nationalism is responsible for the appalling state of Zimbabwe today. However, the tragic consequences for the population have been compounded by the leaders of the MDC.

Based partly on the support of the trade union bureaucracy of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trades Unions (ZTUC) and partly on businessmen opposed to Mugabe, the MDC were able to gain a mass following in the urban areas. They hoped, with pro-IMF policies, to use Western backing to oust Mugabe. In the elections of 2002 they won a large proportion of the vote, but Mugabe clung onto power.

Apart from denouncing Mugabe for rigging the votes, Western governments—unable to get support from South Africa—did not take further action. The MDC had no alternative to pleading for Western support apart from further election campaigns and protest strikes. In consequence their support slumped. Two years ago they split into two factions with differences over election tactics and criticisms of Tsvangirai’s leadership.

In neighbouring South Africa, the much larger working class has also been prevented from coming to the aid of their brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe by the politics of the South African trade unions in COSATU, which is in a governmental alliance with the ANC and bases itself on a pro-capitalist programme. COSATU has now called for a two-day sympathy strike and has politically distanced itself from Mugabe’s regime, but only to offer verbal support for the pro-Western MDC.

At the same time it has raised no opposition to the South African government declaring refugees from Zimbabwe illegal and shipping them back—more than one thousand people a day are bussed back over the border from Johannesburg.

Instead the union leaders are campaigning against the use of cheap labour from Zimbabwe to hold down wages and demanding “harsh penalties for employers breaking the labour laws.”

If resistance to Mugabe’s rule is to succeed it can only be achieved through a politically independent and unified movement of working people in Zimbabwe and throughout southern Africa and on the basis of an international socialist perspective. Such a movement would repudiate the debts to the Western banks, take the mines and factories out of the hands of Western corporations and the local wealthy elites, and develop a socially progressive policy for agriculture.



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