

US government admits backing Zimbabwe's opposition

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The US government has admitted to supporting the opposition to President Robert Mugabe. This is the first time that the Bush administration has officially acknowledged that it backs opposition groups in Zimbabwe.

Its admission came in the annual Supporting Human Rights and Democracy report for 2005-2006 published by the US Department of State.

The Bush administration still claims that it is not seeking regime change, but according to the report, the US has “sponsored public events that presented economic and social analyses discrediting the government’s excuses for its failed policies.” Its aim is “To further strengthen pro-democracy elements,” and over the last year, “the US government continued to support the efforts of the political opposition, the media and civil society to create and defend democratic space and to support persons who criticised the government.”

The report makes it clear that US support has extended to the Zimbabwe Trade Union Congress (ZTUC). “The United States funded programmes on labor issues, including support for an NGO that assisted trade unions in responding to and representing their members’ interests and sponsorship of a labor leader’s participation in a professional exchange programme.”

Elements of Mugabe’s ruling ZANU-PF have also been the recipients of US funds. The report refers to a “US-sponsored programme to strengthen parliamentary committees,” which it claims “resulted in increased debate in Parliament—both from opposition and reform-minded ZANU-PF parliamentarians—and encouraged greater transparency through public hearings on legislation.”

The admission that the US has long been supporting Zimbabwean opposition groups confirms the analysis made by the *World Socialist Web Site*. Among the

groups the US has backed is undoubtedly the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which was set up by the ZTUC in 1999. It is not mentioned by name in the report, which refers to “pro-democracy elements” and “the political opposition,” but it is the major political opponent of Mugabe.

The MDC is based on free market pro-Western policies. When it was first set up by the ZTUC in 1999, the *WSWS* warned “this is a party that will look after the interests of big business, the rich farmers and inward investors, not the working class.”

In 2002, the *WSWS* declared that “the aim of the MDC is to win the support and approval of the Western powers” and pointed out that it had financial backing from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Germany.

The US State Department report indicates for the first time that the MDC almost certainly has American support, although this has to some extent shifted since because it has proved to be so ineffective. In the last year, the US has looked to opponents of Robert Mugabe within ZANU-PF.

It is in this context that the recent remarks of US Ambassador Christopher Dell must be seen. Last month, Dell told a meeting of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) that Zimbabwe had reached a tipping point. He clearly expected some move to be made against Mugabe from within ZANU-PF and from neighbouring states, particularly from the regime of President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa. Dell made it clear that the US would support Zimbabwe renegotiating its debt to the world financial institutions if Harare showed itself willing to do business.

US expectations that Mugabe would be rapidly removed were disappointed. He returned from the SADC meeting without being openly criticised by his fellow presidents and was endorsed by the ZANU-PF

executive as the party's next presidential candidate. Mugabe, who is 83, had been expected to retire. Last year, ZANU-PF refused to accept Mugabe's demand that the presidential elections should be postponed until 2010. This was seen by many commentators as a sign that the opposition to Mugabe inside the party was hardening. But the endorsement of his candidacy now suggests that the position of his internal critics has weakened following the SADC meeting. None of Mugabe's opponents, whether inside ZANU-PF or the MDC, dares to proceed without backing from the South African government.

But the ultimate restraint on the MDC is its links to the West and the wealthy white farmers, which exclude it from mobilising mass popular opposition to Mugabe on a genuinely progressive democratic and social programme. Unable to advance such a clear alternative, its support began to decline even as Mugabe's economic policies failed and the economic crisis deepened. Indeed, the very conditions that should have provided fertile ground for a mass opposition movement proved detrimental to the MDC.

Inflation is running at 1,730 percent, while unemployment is at 80 percent. An estimated 3 million Zimbabweans are refugees in South Africa. There is widespread hunger, and the average life expectancy is down to 34 for women and 37 for men. Hospital patients are dying of easily treated diseases such as hypertension and diabetes because of the lack of common drugs. Added to this, AIDS continues to take its horrific toll of young people.

Under those conditions, the MDC has relied on support from the great powers, token strikes and court action to oppose Mugabe's repressive regime. They have been dependent throughout on support from imperialism, as the latest American report shows, and in no way independent of the political establishment in Zimbabwe.

In the absence of any alternative leadership to mobilise opposition, Mugabe has been able to unleash a wave of repression against the Zimbabwean population. The extent of that repression is to some extent masked by the lack of news coverage. Video coverage of MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai emerging from a police station bloodied by the beating he had just received and speaking from a hospital bed where he was being treated for a fractured skull was recently smuggled out

of the country. Edward Chikombo, the freelance cameraman responsible for that report reaching the world media, has since been found dead. He was abducted from his house by armed men and his body later dumped.

Mugabe's repressive response to the MDC and his brutal clampdown on the population as a whole demonstrate the political bankruptcy of his nationalist perspective. After almost 30 years in power, Mugabe has brought his country to economic ruin. The fact that the international financial institutions, Britain as the former colonial power, and the US as the dominant global power bear primary responsibility for the condition of Zimbabwe does not exonerate him from blame. Despite his anti-imperialist rhetoric, he has no alternative to offer. His bid for economic autarky has ended in ruin.

Mugabe and other nationalist leaders in Southern Africa were brought to power by national liberation struggles or were the front-line states in that struggle. That raised expectations of economic and social justice that cannot be met within the parameters of a capitalist economy. None of the nationalist regimes in Africa can satisfy the demand of the working people for a decent standard of living. In every country, a small ruling elite dominates political power and monopolises the commanding heights of the economy, either as owners or as representatives of the major Western corporations. The SADC conference was an expression of solidarity among this group who are fully prepared to allow Mugabe's brutal repression of the Zimbabwean population.

Rather than placing any confidence in the imperialist-backed MDC or bourgeois nationalists who are temporarily in opposition to Mugabe, the working people of Southern Africa must develop their own independent political movement for socialist and internationalist policies. It is the only way to overthrow Mugabe's despotic regime and to establish a society based on social equality.



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