

# Election standoff in Zimbabwe: The threat of imperialist intervention

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5 April 2008

“Zimbabwe Waits to Exhale” ran the headline in this week’s *Time* magazine.

The eyes of the world’s media are fixed on President Robert Mugabe and the only subject under discussion is “Will he or won’t he go?” In the meantime, a quiet and little remarked process is going on behind the scenes. There is a creeping process of regime change under way that will affect not just Zimbabwe, but the entire region and marks a new phase in the recolonisation of Southern Africa.

The British and US governments are engineering the transition to a new regime that will be more open to transnational investment, will allow the resources of Zimbabwe to be more freely plundered and make a well-educated English-speaking working class available for exploitation.

Despite the economic and military shocks that Britain and America have suffered in recent years, they have not reversed the wave of neocolonial adventurism that they began with the invasion of Iraq. The setbacks they have suffered in Iraq and the economic crisis they face have only made them more determined to salvage their position of dominance by military means.

Under Labour, the UK economy has become almost entirely dependent on finance capital, and the most dangerous and speculative areas of finance capital at that. In conditions of mounting recession, the UK is relying on its military capacity as never before. Brown, like Blair before him, has tied himself to the coattails of the US, and the same partnership that invaded Iraq and Afghanistan is menacing Iran and has set its sights on Zimbabwe. Britain gave up its hold on Zimbabwe very reluctantly and sees an opportunity to reestablish itself there.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has already called for British troops to go into Zimbabwe and insisted that it would not be an aggressive force. “It is merely ensuring that human rights are maintained,” he claimed. A peacekeeping force was needed, Tutu said, because “The situation is very volatile. Many, many people are angry. I doubt that they are just going to sit back and fold their arms. They are going to take to the streets and I am fearful.... We have seen what happened in Kenya.”

Tutu is using his prestige as a Nobel laureate and anti-Apartheid campaigner to make an extraordinary move seem right and necessary. Speaking later the same day at a memorial service for anti-Apartheid activist Ivan Toms, he called on Mugabe to stand down.

“I mean when your time is over, your time is over,” he said. Mugabe had played a pivotal role in the armed struggle, so, “We hope he will be able to step down gracefully, with dignity.”

In writing Mugabe’s obituary before he has left the presidential palace, Tutu is speaking for a layer of African nationalist opinion that

senses that the “wind of change” is now blowing the other way and that they need to accommodate themselves to a more aggressive attitude on the part of the major powers. Whether Mugabe retires from the political scene gracefully or stands and fights, the present crisis is an indication of a shift in world politics that has brought to an end the period when nationalist regimes could present themselves as liberators of the African masses.

There are indications that Mugabe might attempt a military clampdown on the opposition. Foreign reporters have been arrested in recent days, the election headquarters of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has been raided, and army roadblocks encircle the capital, Harare. Deputy Information Minister Bright Matonga told reporters, “President Mugabe is going to fight to the last, and he’s not giving up, he’s not going anywhere, he hasn’t lost the election.”

But Mugabe cannot halt the underlying processes that have undermined his position by military means alone. The crisis brought on by the election was the product of a protracted economic change that has now produced a sudden political shift. The government-appointed Zimbabwe Electoral Commission has been forced to admit that the ruling party ZANU-PF has lost control of parliament and has still not released the result of the presidential elections, strongly suggesting that Mugabe has lost.

Mugabe’s last hope of retaining power is to claim that neither candidate for the presidency won a majority and that there must be a runoff between him and MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai. During a further election campaign, he could hope to use intimidation and ballot rigging to win a majority. But Mugabe could once command mass political support because of his role in the war against the white racist regime that ruled what was then Rhodesia. To admit that he can no longer secure more than 50 percent of the vote is to admit defeat. A victory in the second round would merely postpone the day of reckoning. He has been fatally wounded by the election, and his opponents inside and outside ZANU-PF are aware of this fact. It would only be a matter of time before he was challenged again.

His hold on power has been unravelling for almost a decade. As long ago as 1999, when the MDC first emerged out of the Zimbabwe Trade Union Congress, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that trade union and business leaders, who had been happy to work with Mugabe since he came to power in 1980, were becoming increasingly restive.

“As Zimbabwe slides towards economic collapse, the trade unions have stepped in to form a new political party,” we wrote. “But this is a party that will look after the interests of big business, the rich farmers and inward investors, not the working class.”

That same year, the WSWWS described the way in which the

International Monetary Fund was tightening the screws on Zimbabwe:

“Zimbabwe is in the hands of the moneylenders who are laying claim to everything in sight. These standby credits will ensure a huge transfer of wealth from one of the world’s poorest nations to the international bankers and transnational corporations.”

Since then, Mugabe has tried every method in his power to escape from the grip of the international bankers and corporations, without success. He refused to implement IMF measures, stopped repaying his loans for a time, and seized the land of white farmers and redistributed it to his supporters. He demolished working class shantytown districts, leaving thousands homeless in “Operation Murambatsvina,” and suppressed all opposition with the utmost ruthlessness.

In his latest bid to maintain an autarkic economy that did not depend on international finance or Western companies he has turned to China, which has become one of the major backers of his regime. China’s need for platinum and chromium to feed its booming economy gave Mugabe the chance to survive a little longer. Mugabe’s “Look East” policy saw trade between the two countries increase to US\$100 million. China is one of the biggest investors in Zimbabwe. But in recent months, Beijing has, if not cut Mugabe adrift, at least adopted a lower profile.

David Dorwood of the Africa Studies Institute of La Trobe University, Melbourne, told Australian Broadcasting Company News that Beijing had concluded that it was only a matter of time before Mugabe went: “They want to secure their resources with the new administration and therefore are sort of taking less of an active role in propping up the ZANU-PF and Robert Mugabe.”

China’s interest in Zimbabwe would “persist irrespective of the government,” Dorwood said. Beijing would welcome a Tsvangirai administration because “Zimbabwe has become really quite dysfunctional. The Chinese need to have reliable infrastructure.”

Mugabe supporters have seen China as fundamentally different from Western governments and companies. They have held China up as the liberator of Africa because of its long-established connections with Mugabe that go back to the Cold War. But Chinese companies must work in the same economic environment as every other company in the world, and Zimbabwe’s platinum and chromium come higher in their scale of priorities than any thought of preserving Mugabe’s hold on the presidency.

The tiny space for manoeuvre that China allowed Mugabe is therefore closing. In the countryside, even his most fervent supporters admit that it is time for him to go. The generals and heads of the security services may be prepared to back him a little while longer, at least until they can negotiate a suitable deal, but the rank and file of the army are as alienated from his regime as the rest of the Zimbabwean population.

Britain has let it be known that an unprecedented £1 billion IMF-backed aid package is awaiting the arrival of Tsvangirai in the presidential palace. It was being discussed at the NATO summit in Bucharest this week. If the opposition has to fight a run-off election, it will use this promised aid package as an incentive to voters.

The UK government’s Department for International Development has been running what they call “turn-around models” for Zimbabwe, and if a Tsvangirai government comes to power, Britain will insist that its economic strategy is followed. The aim will be to bring Zimbabwe’s 100,000 percent inflation rate down within a year. Such a programme would be far more damaging than even the most severe of previous Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed on African countries by the IMF. The aid would be dependent on the working

class and rural poor bearing the cost of the fight against inflation.

In 2002, Eddie Cross of the MDC wrote to the WWS in an attempt to elicit our support for his party’s economic policies. We rejected his overtures and wrote:

“You say that the IMF and World Bank would help Zimbabwe get debt relief, but what attacks would you have to impose in order to get it? As you well know you would have to privatise every state asset in Zimbabwe. Your Economic Stabilisation and Recovery Programme states that within its first 100 days an MDC government would begin the process of privatising all parastatals, which you would aim to have completed within two years. In every country where these measures have been applied they have meant mass unemployment, escalating poverty, the destruction of whole industries and infrastructural collapse.”

The US has long been a supporter of the MDC and opposition elements within ZANU-PF. A year ago, the WWS pointed to US Ambassador Christopher Dell’s remark that Zimbabwe had “reached a tipping point” and to the report of the US State Department that it was funding “pro-democracy elements” in Zimbabwe. Dell clearly favoured regime change then. The role of the MDC in this situation will be to control the working class and rural poor whose needs they cannot possibly meet. With US and British backing, it may prove to be an even more oppressive regime than the present one.

Tutu wants British troops deployed in Zimbabwe because he fears that the population has been driven to such a point of desperation that there will be a popular uprising that the MDC will not be able to contain. That such a scenario could even be contemplated, let alone seriously discussed in the media, more than a quarter of century after the colonial Rhodesian regime was overthrown is a measure of the failure of the nationalist movement.

Mugabe is a determined and capable nationalist leader, but he has proved incapable of breaking free from the grip of imperialism. His entire perspective has proved to be bankrupt. Zimbabwe has remained in a position of semi-colonial dependence from 1980 onwards.

The crisis that Mugabe faces in Zimbabwe is only the most acute expression of what is happening to regimes throughout the continent. A long-established political formation is unravelling before our eyes. Kenya was pitched into crisis following its recent election. In South Africa, Jacob Zuma is challenging President Thabo Mbeki. In each case, the form of the political crisis and its intensity is different, and yet all express the same phenomenon. The African nationalist movement has lost its social base and all semblance of political legitimacy.



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