# Zimbabwe: Mugabe government responds to mass opposition with repression

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President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has launched a wave of repression in a bid to cling to power in the face of mass opposition in the towns and countryside. The move follows the defeat of the ruling ZANU-PF party in the parliamentary elections and Mugabe's failure to win an overall majority in the presidential election.

Soldiers wearing face masks are said to have beaten up civilians in the town of Gweru. They accused their victims of not "voting correctly."

Some 60 white farmers and at least two black farmers are said to have been evicted from their land. Seven officials of the Zimbabwean Electoral Commission, which was responsible for counting the votes, have been arrested. They are to be charged with rigging the election in favour of the opposition. Four foreign journalists have been arrested, including *New York Times* correspondent Barry Bearak.

A serving officer in the Zimbabwean military has released the names of 200 high-ranking officers who are said to be leading gangs of thugs in the guise of war veterans in attacks on government opponents. Unemployed youths are reportedly being recruited to join government-backed gangs.

Accounts are only slowly emerging from rural areas where the mobile phone network does not reach. Gangs are said to be hunting down opponents of the regime, burning houses and beating people. Tendai Biti, secretary general of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), was reported as saying that there had been "massive violence in the country" since the election.

The rigging of elections and the intimidation of voters has become standard practice for the regime. Mugabe has adopted similar tactics every time his hold on power has been threatened.

In the 2002 presidential elections opposition supporters were abducted, beaten and murdered. Criticizing the president was made a criminal offence. Electoral rolls were padded with fake voters and new rules were introduced to make the registration of urban voters more difficult. Local journalists were abducted and killed. Government food aid to drought-stricken areas was used as a means of buying votes.

In May 2005, the government demolished shanty towns in "Operation Murambatsvina," which means "clear out the trash" in Shona. Residents were loaded onto trucks and driven into the countryside where they were dumped without any means of livelihood or even basic sanitation.

An estimated 700,000 people, or six percent of the population, were displaced in this operation. In total, 2.4 million people were affected directly or indirectly. It was an attempt to crush opposition among the urban working class. When the white farms were occupied, the rural workers they employed were treated with similar brutality.

At each point in this process, Mugabe has stepped up his anti-imperialist rhetoric in an attempt to rally support. Last weekend he declared, "The land is ours, it must not be allowed to slip back into the hands of the whites."

Mugabe presents himself as the liberator of his country, but his record tells another story. He was brought to power in 1980 with the backing of Britain and the United States, who saw in Mugabe their best hope of suppressing the working class and peasantry.

The then-British colony of Rhodesia had unilaterally declared independence in 1965 under a white racist regime, which refused to grant even the most modest political rights to the majority of the population. An insurgency developed, leading US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to fear that the impasse in Rhodesia would allow the Soviet Union to gain ground in southern Africa and threaten strategic American interests. He put pressure on Britain to reach an accord.

The Lancaster House agreement was the result. The Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher would have preferred Bishop Muzorewa to come to power, but his conciliatory attitude to the white regime led to his being routed in the British-supervised elections.

Mugabe topped the poll and proved that he was the only man who had a chance of ruling an increasingly radicalized population. His Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) proclaimed itself Maoist and pro-Chinese, and sought support primarily in the rural areas.

It had the advantage as far as the US was concerned of being opposed to the pro-Soviet Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) of Joshua Nkomo, from which Mugabe himself split in 1963 to join ZANU. The Western powers feared Soviet influence in Africa more than they did Chinese influence.

Washington and London got what they wanted. The new state of Zimbabwe did not become a Soviet client. Mugabe preserved capitalism and safeguarded all major imperialist investments. He did not expropriate the white farmers, but offered compensation to those who wanted to emigrate with money provided by the US and Britain. Most remained secure in the enjoyment of their possessions and privileged life style. In fact, more settlers arrived after independence. Tobacco exports continued and it was business as usual for the mining companies.

Mugabe routinely speaks of his "revolution," but in reality the institutions of the Rhodesian state were largely preserved and adopted by the new regime. Peter Walls, the head of the armed forces, remained in office as did Ken Flowers, head of the Rhodesian intelligence services. Peasants who tried to occupy land were driven off by the security forces and Mugabe was dubbed "Good old Bob" by his former opponents.

Mugabe's methods were as brutal then as they are now. The only difference is that Britain and the US did not object to his attacks on ZAPU.

Nkomo's social base was mostly among the Matabele. In 1982, Mugabe launched "Operation Gukurahundi"—sweep away the chaff—in Matabeleland. There were beatings, murders, arson, rapes and public executions. Famine relief was blocked.

An estimated 20,000 civilians died before Mugabe declared an amnesty in 1987, which led up to the merger of the two parties to form ZANU-PF (Popular Front-the previous electoral name for ZAPU.)

Mugabe's anti-imperialist rhetoric was feverish as he dealt with the internal opposition to his regime. But the white farmers had nothing to fear. Land reform proceeded at a glacial pace. By 1998, only 70,000

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families had been resettled. Most of them received poor-quality, drought-prone land. White farmers continued to own 40 percent of the land and two thirds of the best agricultural land.

Mugabe's regime has presided over massive inequality in Zimbabwe since it came to power. A new ruling elite emerged under his patronage, like millionaire businessman Philip Chiyangwa, who boasted, "I am rich because I belong to ZANU-PF."

While the new ruling elite enjoyed private health care and private education for their children, the former fighters were left destitute. Government ministers even looted funds set aside for the compensation of war victims.

Threat of land reform remained a useful tool to win support among his increasingly disillusioned supporters and to gain concessions from the US and Britain. Mugabe remained valuable to them, particularly as long as the Soviet Union was in existence. His regime was a vital part of their Cold War strategy in Africa.

Mugabe was given favourable treatment by donors and lenders as Britain and the US tried to establish his regime as a bulwark of capitalism in southern Africa. Thus, while other African regimes came under pressure during the 1980s to cut social spending, Zimbabwe was able to develop a relatively high standard of public health care and education.

The liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought this period to an end.

In response, Mugabe willingly adopted an International Monetary Fund (IMF) Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) that involved enormous attacks on the working class and rural poor. Spending on public health care and education was cut. The rural poor were driven further into poverty while huge tax breaks were offered to the commercial farmers. By 1999, two thirds of the population were living on less than $2 a day and Mugabe had begun to speak of "pragmatic socialism" and "indigenous capitalism."

Opposition to the ZANU-PF regime mounted. In 1997 there was a massive strike wave that included Zimbabwe's first general strike for half a century.

Faced with rising prices, higher taxation, mounting unemployment and falling living standards, workers came out against the government. In 1999, the Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions (ZCTU) responded to the unrest by forming a new party—the MDC—under the leadership of former ZCTU general secretary Morgan Tsvangirai.

The MDC and the ZCTU did not oppose the IMF measures that were driving their members into poverty, but instead argued for a more effective implementation of the programme. They won the backing of white farmers in the Commercial Farmers Union and of businessmen in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's export earnings fell because the price of the commodities it depended on were driven down. The government had to go ever deeper into debt, and the IMF made the conditions of its loans even more stringent.

Mugabe came into conflict with the IMF only when it became clear that its demands would undermine the basis of the ZANU-PF regime. As long as the IMF measures only hit the mass of the population, Mugabe was prepared to implement them. But if he could not pay his army or reward his supporters, he knew that his days in the presidential palace were numbered.

As the US and UK became ever more dissatisfied with Mugabe, they imposed sanctions that worsened the already appalling situation facing Zimbabweans. The Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act passed by the US passed in 2001 turned off the credit tap to Zimbabwe and effectively excluded the country from functioning on the world market. As a result, the government has often no hard currency to pay for a shipment of wheat to put bread on the supermarket shelves. But the ruling elite have continued to live in luxury.

London and Washington increasingly looked to the MDC and provided the new party with funding and advice. Tsvangirai assured his foreign backers in 2000 that "We would privatise and restore business confidence in Zimbabwe."

The MDC is a party that has nothing to offer the mass of the population in Zimbabwe except more suffering. But it has benefited electorally from the growing opposition to Mugabe.

The most public targets of the government's repression are the local activists of the MDC. But the regime's fundamental objective is to terrorize the working class and rural poor and prevent any independent class opposition emerging.

At no point has the MDC attempted to mobilize mass opposition to the regime. Like all the ruling elites in Africa, the leaders of the MDC fear the independent strength of working class because it threatens their privileged lifestyle. They share that class outlook with Mugabe's cronies.

Tsvangirai is even now attempting to cut deals with factions of ZANU-PF that have become dissatisfied with Mugabe. If he came to power, his attitude to working people would be essentially the same as that of Mugabe.

Social conditions have been destroyed over the past two decades. Inflation is officially running at 165,000 percent, but the *Financial Times* puts the actual rate at 400,000 percent. Even the 20 percent of people still in work find their wages eroded on a daily basis.

In addition, Zimbabwe has one of the highest rates on HIV/AIDS infection in the world. A quarter of the population are thought to be HIV positive. The epidemic, coupled with malnutrition, has reduced the life expectancy to 34 years for women and 37 for men, one of the lowest in the world. Many elderly grandparents are caring for children orphaned by AIDS-related diseases.

Inflation, sanctions and the loss of a generation of workers to disease have sent the economy into free-fall. Formerly one of Africa's main grain exporters, Zimbabwe has become dependent on food aid.

An estimated quarter of the population—three million—has fled the country. The latest round of government repression and the complicity of the MDC have sent more people across the border into South Africa, where they are forced to eke out a living in the informal economy. Recently, 1,500 Zimbabweans are reported to have crossed Beit Bridge in one day alone.

Even so, the working class has again and again shown its readiness to fight. There has been a wave of strikes since 2007 involving broad layers of the working class. This year alone, doctors and nurses, civil servants and council workers have all taken strike action. Teachers went on strike just before the election to demand an increase in their Z$500 million a month pay—the equivalent of just $10. Hospital staff only returned to work because they feared for their patients.

It is not a matter of workers choosing between Mugabe and Tsvangirai, between the MDC and ZANU-PF. Both represent class forces whose interests are antithetical to those of the working class.

The 28 years of Mugabe's rule in Zimbabwe and that of other bourgeois national movements throughout Africa are a vindication of Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, which insists that the national bourgeoisie in the oppressed nations can have no genuine independence from the imperialist powers, the transnational corporations and major banks.

The African bourgeoisie conceived of national independence from the standpoint of securing its own right to exploit the working class. The need to win influence over the workers and oppressed masses required for a time that it dress up this perspective in socialist clothing—a task made easier by backing from the Soviet Union in furtherance of the Kremlin's geo-political interests.

But the post-colonial regimes in Africa remained dependent on world markets dominated by the imperialist powers. They have all functioned

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historically—and do so ever more nakedly—as mechanisms through which the economic exploitation and political suppression of the working class on behalf of the corporations and banks have been imposed.

Precisely because the impoverishment of Africa is rooted in its position within the global capitalist economy, it can be ended only through the reorganisation of the world economy to meet the needs of the world's people. The economic and democratic development of the African continent could not take place based on the setting up of nominally independent states based on capitalist foundations, but only through the overthrow of capitalism by the working class, leading behind it the oppressed rural masses. This struggle cannot be completed on the foundations of a single nation, or even on a continent-wide basis, but demands the victory of the working class in the struggle for socialism in the imperialist centres.

The only way out of the terrible impasse for the Zimbabwean and African masses is the organization of the working class in its own party, uniting its struggles with those of workers the world over on the basis of an international socialist perspective.

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