

Zimbabwe: Tsvangirai pulls out of election as Britain and US seek regime change

Ann Talbot
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The decision by Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), to pull out of the presidential election in Zimbabwe has been followed by an appeal for military intervention to oust Robert Mugabe.

Tsvangirai sought refuge in the Dutch embassy Sunday, following weeks of government-backed brutality directed at MDC supporters.

He wrote in the UK-based *Guardian* yesterday that the intention of the MDC was to “challenge standard procedure in international diplomacy.”

“The quiet diplomacy of South African President Thabo Mbeki has been characteristic of this worn approach,” Tsvangirai added. That had failed and “a more energetic and, indeed, activist strategy” was needed.

“Our proposal is one that aims to remove the often debilitating barriers of state sovereignty, which rests on a centuries-old foundation of the sanctity of governments, even those which have proven themselves illegitimate and decrepit.” Tsvangirai continued.

He demanded United Nations intervention. “We do not want armed conflict, but the people of Zimbabwe need the words of indignation from global leaders to be backed by the moral rectitude of military force.”

With a UN force in place it would be possible, Tsvangirai maintained, for presidential elections to proceed.

If there was ever any doubt about the MDC’s political dependence on the US and UK this call for state sovereignty to be overthrown would dispel it. Tsvangirai is calling for an army of colonial intervention to take over Zimbabwe. He rejects any conception that this former colony is an independent country with the right of self-determination.

Mugabe has long accused Tsvangirai of being a puppet of London and Washington. He is not wrong in that. But it is Mugabe’s own attempt to beat the population of Zimbabwe into supporting him that has opened the door to foreign intervention.

The estimate of the number of people who have died in Zimbabwe as a result of government-backed violence has risen to 500. Doctors confirm that at least 100 have died. But the figure is probably much higher because hundreds are missing after being kidnapped by government forces and irregular units.

Mugabe presents himself as an opponent of colonialism. But it was Britain and the US that put him in power in 1980 and stood by when he wiped out his opponents in ZAPU with a similar campaign to the one he has unleashed on the MDC.

So favourably did successive British governments look on Mugabe that he was awarded a knighthood. That honour has only just been removed.

The British government has rejected efforts by Mbeki to secure a compromise government of national unity and is seeking to secure the support of various African regimes and sections of the ZANU-PF and security services for Mugabe’s removal.

Mugabe has lost the popular support he once enjoyed and ZANU-PF is deeply divided by factional struggles.

Lawyers for Tendai Biti, the deputy leader of the MDC who has been arrested and charged with treason, say that he is being interrogated about which leading members of ZANU-PF have done deals over immunity from prosecution. At present Emerson Mnangagwa, who chairs the Joint Operations Command and is organizing the repression, is in a dominant position. He is attempting to strengthen his position in ZANU-PF against other factions, especially that of Grace and Solomon Mujuru, by implicating them with the opposition.

But Mugabe has been able to remain in power thus far primarily due to the political impotence of the MDC as a tool of the Western powers and Zimbabwe’s white business community.

Such was the hostility to ZANU-PF that the MDC won a victory in the March elections against their own expectations. But it does not enjoy the type of active mass support that would allow it to combat Mugabe’s repression. Its aim has always been to win power courtesy of US and British backing for regime change. Even the MDC’s most active supporters are flocking to the MDC headquarters for protection only to be carried off to torture camps by the military.

Tsvangirai’s sudden decision to abandon the election and call directly for outside intervention reflects a shift in this direction in London. Lord Paddy Ashdown, former European Union high representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, has let it be known that he thinks military intervention could be justified, making a spurious comparison with the situation in Rwanda, where civil war in 1994 claimed between 500,000 and 1 million lives.

“The situation in Zimbabwe could deteriorate to a point where genocide could be a possible outcome—something that looks like [another] Rwanda.” Ashdown told the *Times*.

Ashdown stressed that Britain would have to play “a delicate role.” Military intervention would depend on the Africa Union and Zimbabwe’s neighbours.

Lord Carrington, who as British foreign secretary negotiated the Lancaster House agreement that brought Mugabe to power, also stressed that it was for other African countries to deal with Mugabe.

These statements reflect the very real difficulties facing the Western powers and their efforts to bring about regime change in the aftermath of the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions.

This has meant that to date Britain and the US have concentrated on

placing maximum pressure to isolate Mugabe and, if possible, to secure the agreement of a coalition of African states to depose him.

Britain, the US and France secured a UN Security Council resolution condemning “the campaign of violence against the political opposition ... which has resulted in the killing of scores of opposition activists and other Zimbabweans and the beating and displacement of thousands of people, including many women and children.”

This is the first time that the UN has passed such a resolution. Previous British and US attempts to push through a resolution condemning the Zimbabwean government have been blocked by China and Russia.

Both Britain and the US have refused to recognize the outcome of the election, which with the withdrawal of Tsvangirai will inevitably return Mugabe to power. Prime Minister Gordon Brown declared in the House of Commons that Mugabe’s government “is a regime that should not be recognised by anyone.” US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice concurred. “The Mugabe regime,” she said, “cannot be considered legitimate in the absence of a run-off.”

They wanted the UN Security Council to recognise Tsvangirai as president, but this was rejected.

London and Washington are demanding a tightening of sanctions against Zimbabwe, directed particularly at isolating Mugabe’s immediate clique within ZANU-PF. “We are preparing intensified sanctions—financial and travel sanctions—against named members of the Mugabe regime,” Gordon Brown said at Prime Minister’s question time.

“We do know the names of the individuals who are surrounding Mugabe at the moment, we know the names of the criminal cabal that is trying to keep him in power, and we will name those individuals and these will be part of the next stage of the sanctions.”

Tsvangirai’s withdrawal from the election has given Washington and London the necessary pretext to demand immediate regime change in Zimbabwe. Neither the UK nor the US government is publicly discussing military intervention, but Ashdown is being used to float the idea in an unofficial capacity. His military background in the SAS and his role in Bosnia give his remarks a certain weight.

Sustained diplomatic pressure is being brought to bear in Africa. Following the UN resolution the South African Development Community (SADC) called an emergency meeting to discuss the Zimbabwe situation.

President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa has found himself completely sidelined. It appears that he has either not been invited to the emergency meeting or has refused to attend. Mbeki has been acting as a mediator in Zimbabwe on behalf of the SADC and has come under increasing criticism.

President Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania is currently head of the African Union, the body that would be called upon to authorize the use of troops in Zimbabwe. He is playing a leading role in the SADC meeting.

An SADC spokesman acknowledged that the organisation was concerned about the “climate of extreme violence” in Zimbabwe. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that he was in close contact with a number of African leaders about the situation. They were agreed, he said, that the elections should be postponed.

Kofi Annan, Ban Ki-moon’s predecessor at the UN, said that “Any run-off or announcement of a winner under these circumstances will neither be credible nor acceptable to Zimbabweans, Africa and the international community.”

ANC President Jacob Zuma has come increasingly to the fore over

the question of Zimbabwe and is treated as if he is already South Africa’s president by the UK and the US. He has declared, “We cannot agree with ZANU-PF. We cannot agree with them on values.”

Zuma called for regional leaders to intervene. Speaking with the authority of the ANC he said that the election on Friday should be abandoned. “The ANC [African National Congress] says the run-off is no longer a solution,” Zuma said, “you need a political arrangement first ... then elections down the line.”

The Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has thrown its weight behind Zuma. COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi insisted, “The SADC governments must not drag themselves into recognising what everybody now agrees to be an illegitimate Robert Mugabe government.”

“We don’t want Mugabe to be recognised at all, that should be the starting point.”

Former South African President Nelson Mandela used the occasion of a celebrity dinner in London to “express his deep concern and sadness” at the situation in Zimbabwe. Since his retirement Mandela rarely comments on current politics, so his remarks will increase the isolation of Mbeki and help to sanction further action by the UK and US.

British and American companies with investments in Zimbabwe are also coming under intense political pressure to toe the Washington and London line. Sir Mark Moody-Stuart, chairman of Anglo-American, insisted in a BBC interview that his company was not doing business with the Mugabe regime. But Anglo-American is about to invest \$400 million in its Unki platinum mine.

Anglo-American is one of a number of companies—including Lonrho, British American Tobacco, BP, Barclays Bank, Old Mutual and Standard Chartered Bank—that have all continued to do business in Zimbabwe. Despite Mugabe’s increasingly strident tone he has not threatened the position of these companies in any way. All of them have been vital to the continued existence of the regime. Barclays Bank has provided an essential line of finance to Mugabe’s government. At least four leading ZANU-PF figures bank with Barclays. The bank has provided loans for farms they received in the land redistribution programme.

Always in the background in any discussion of Africa is the spectre of China, which is one of the main investors in Zimbabwe. In the past the UK and US have been prepared to turn a blind eye to companies doing business there because it provided them with a vital bulwark against Chinese encroachment.

In the past, Mugabe and other African heads of state have thought that China’s presence on the continent gave them a greater room for manoeuvre. But it is becoming increasingly clear that it merely puts them in the firing line as Britain and the United States position themselves to regain a colonial control over the continent’s strategic resources.



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