

Zimbabwe election: US and UK move to impose sanctions

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2 July 2008

Robert Mugabe was inaugurated for a sixth term as President of Zimbabwe on Sunday, following an election campaign characterised by government backed violence and intimidation.

Mugabe, standing for the ruling ZANU-PF, claimed to have received more than 85 percent of the vote. But his only opponent, Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), had withdrawn from the campaign because of the level of violence and intimidation. International observers condemned the elections. "The current atmosphere prevailing in the country did not give rise to the conduct of free, fair and credible elections," said Marwick Khumalo head of the Pan-African Parliament monitoring team.

Observers from Zimbabwe's neighbours in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) concurred. "The elections," the SADC observers concluded, "did not represent the will of the people of Zimbabwe."

The elections were "worse than those we witnessed in Angola in 1992, after decades of war, and are not credible," one SADC observer said.

Zimbabwean observers called off their plans to monitor the polls because it was too dangerous.

A government-sponsored campaign of beatings, kidnappings and murders has left 104 people dead and 3,500 injured. Doctors who have been treating the wounded say that this is just the tip of the iceberg. "What we are seeing is probably 10 percent of what has actually happened," a doctor who wished to remain anonymous told reporters. He said that the violence was the "worst the country has witnessed."

The injuries he had treated were more serious than those experienced during the liberation war of the 1970s. "This is much, much more severe," the doctor said, "We are not seeing simple fractures, we are seeing bones smashed into 20 pieces. People being forced to walk on burning coals, having scalding water poured over them and their wounds poisoned."

Marwick Kumhalo said that monitors had evidence of violence and intimidation all over the country in the run up to the election. The turnout, he said, was low.

In Mashonaland the number of votes announced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) exceeds the number of registered voters. The ZEC claimed that the turn out was comparable to that in the first round of the elections in March. But some polling stations in Bulawayo reported that they did not receive a single voter.

In Harare, the capital, few voters were seen. Many registered voters said that they did not intend to vote. There were a large number of spoilt ballot papers. Some had obscene language directed at Mugabe.

Turnout was very low in major urban areas. Voters in those areas can expect retribution. Reprisals have already been reported in the working class suburb of Chitungwiza outside Harare.

In the wake of the election the repression is continuing. Anyone who does not have the red ink stained finger that shows they voted is immediately at risk.

The ZEC has handed the details of polling patterns in each electoral

ward to the government. Security forces and government-backed militias will be able to target voters in wards that did not endorse Mugabe.

Leaked minutes from the Joint Operations Command (JOC), which has been coordinating the coercion, indicate that the regime has decided to wipe out the opposition MDC.

The UK based *Independent* has seen sworn affidavits from reserve bank officials who transported money to regional organisers to finance the campaign of violence against the opposition.

There are reports that re-education camps at which opposition voters have been tortured are being re-supplied for a second phase of the campaign. An opposition activist told reporters that local businesses in Chinhoyi in Mashonaland West are being forced to make contributions to fund the repression.

"These camps are now regrouping. They're going to unleash another terror campaign," he said.

Mugabe went almost directly from his inauguration to the African Union (AU) summit in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt. The response of other African leaders to his presence was muted. They are reluctant to criticise a fellow African leader in public. Many of them have records of repression as bad, or worse than Mugabe's.

Other African leaders, such as the summit's host Muhammad Hosni Mubarak, are notoriously corrupt. Mubarak is accused of rigging the 2005 election. These were the first multi-party elections to take place since he came to power in 1981. He has maintained a state of emergency rule for the last 25 years.

Mubarak and his fellow African leaders have no more desire to allow democratic rights to their people than Mugabe. All the African rulers at the Sharm el Sheikh summit have for the most part enriched a tiny elite at the expense of the majority of the population.

But these regimes value their relationship with the United States and are coming under intense pressure to isolate and condemn Mugabe.

Egyptian prisons, for example, have proved invaluable in providing a secret base for the torture of US detainees in the so-called war on terror. The Italian authorities are currently investigating the "extraordinary rendition" of Abu Omar, an Egyptian cleric living as a refuge in Italy. He was seized by the CIA from the street in Milan in 2003. He was then taken to the US airbase at Brescia and flown to Ramstein in Germany from where he was taken to an Egyptian prison and tortured.

Even the Sudanese government, which is regularly condemned in the US press, has proved useful in intelligence matters to the US government. Muammar al-Gaddafi of Libya was recruited to the US "war on terror" in 2004.

The African states may well acquiesce to US demands on Mugabe, if they want to maintain their favoured status as allies in the war on terror.

Zimbabwe has become something of test case for US power in Africa, which has suffered a serious setback following the military debacle in Iraq and the emergence of China as a major player on the continent.

"I would suggest that one not take from the soft words in an open

plenary as a reflection of the deep concern of leaders here of the situation in Zimbabwe,” said US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Jendayi Fraser. “I would expect them to have very, very strong words for him.”

Her remarks were as much an instruction to the African leaders as a comment for journalists. The US, Britain and the European Union have made it clear that they will not recognise Mugabe as president of Zimbabwe.

Visiting Beijing, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called for China to support an arms embargo against Zimbabwe. But Chinese Foreign Secretary Yang Jiechi insisted that the only way forward was for the government of Zimbabwe to enter into talks with the opposition.

It seems that a call for a negotiated settlement and a power-sharing government like that established in Kenya following the disputed election earlier this year may emerge from the AU summit. On the second day of the summit the South African paper *Business Day* reported that President Thabo Mbeki was close to brokering a deal between Mugabe and Tsvangirai.

Even if Thabo Mbeki succeeds in establishing a government of national unity, that is unlikely to be the end of the matter. The US and UK seem to have already rejected this option.

An article in the *Financial Times* on 25 June posed a somewhat different scenario. The article’s authors reflected on the recent pronouncements by a series of African leaders and former leaders denouncing Mugabe.

Rising commodity prices and economic liberalisation has ensured that growth rates across much of Africa remain at 5 percent, the article said. But food prices and transport costs are rising fast, it warned. Under these circumstances, Mugabe’s intransigence may have unforeseen effects.

“Not only has Robert Mugabe put southern Africa in jeopardy. Like ripples on a pond, which can drown a man already up to his nose in water, his actions can strain an uneasy peace in Kenya, affect food shipments to refugees in east Africa and add to the trials of Britain’s beleaguered government.”

The article was written by former Africa editor of the *Financial Times* Michael Holman and Dr Gregg Mills, director of the Brenthurst Foundation, a think tank founded by the Oppenheimer family to further the economic development of Africa. These two old Africa hands proceeded to imagine a scenario in which attacks on whites might lead the UK to attempt an evacuation of its nationals and a convoy to the South African border might be attacked.

Zimbabwe’s second city of Bulawayo, the article suggests, might become a centre of resistance and railway connections might be severed. Mbeki might offer Mugabe sanctuary in South Africa, but President of the ANC Jacob Zuma and the South African trade unions might respond by organising “countrywide protests.”

In the midst of all that, Holman and Mills imagine, “Somali-based terrorists bomb a tourist hotel” while in Kenya further ethnic riots disrupt the power-sharing government and hamper relief to refugees in central Africa.

This could be the plot of a political thriller rather than an article in a sober financial journal. But the fact that it appears in the *Financial Times* and is the work of two senior commentators on Africa gives it a certain weight.

Such is the fragility of the world situation following the credit crunch and the still expanding speculative bubble in commodity prices that Mugabe’s attempt to hang on to power threatens to destabilise not only southern Africa, but the entire continent. In recognising that threat, Holman and Mills evince a desire to seize the moment and precipitate a crisis that they envisage to be already on the horizon.

How far the US and UK intelligence agencies would be behind the disastrous scenarios that Holman and Mills draft out, we may never know. But it is revealing that such influential commentators assume only a bloody outcome is possible in Zimbabwe.

The article is an indication of the extent to which the attitude of the US and UK towards Zimbabwe has shifted. At present it is accepted that the US and UK cannot intervene openly in Zimbabwe. As the *Economist* recently said, “other methods, with Africans to the fore, must be tried first.” But the scenario drafted out by Mills and Holman would provide a pretext for American and British intervention.

An editorial in the *Financial Times* expressed the western powers’ dissatisfaction with Mbeki’s attempts to establish a government of national unity in Zimbabwe.

“Thabo Mbeki, South Africa’s president, who has sought to resolve the crisis with a Kenyan-style national unity government, should accept he has failed. There is no way any western nation will send international aid to a regime that has Mr. Mugabe or ZANU-PF at the helm. An MDC government that included a small ZANU-PF contingent would be an acceptable price for ending the violence, but is unlikely to happen.”

The *Financial Times* called for tighter sanctions and demanded that “Western financial institutions should be debarred from operating in Harare.”

US and UK policy is moving rapidly in this direction. President George Bush announced that he had instructed Condoleezza Rice and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson to “develop sanctions against this illegitimate Government of Zimbabwe and those who support it.”

The giant mining company Anglo-American has come under intense pressure to abandon its planned investment in a Zimbabwe platinum mine. Barclays bank is coming under pressure to cease business in Zimbabwe after more than a century. The UK-based supermarket chain Tesco has announced that it has stopped sourcing goods from Zimbabwe.

These economic measures and the proposed sanctions will inevitably have more impact on the population of Zimbabwe than on the ruling elite, who have long since established their own secret channels for funding. Tesco, Barclays and Anglo-American are major employers in what is left of the formal economy in Zimbabwe.

Sanctions will mean that it will become even more difficult for hospitals to source medicines and for ordinary people unconnected with the regime to buy fuel. As the West tightens the screws on the Zimbabwean economy, more people will flock across the country’s borders to escape poverty and malnutrition.

The experience of the recent election has demonstrated that Morgan Tsvangirai’s opposition offers no alternative to Mugabe or to Western domination. From the outset, Tsvangirai’s party has been a pliant tool of the West and the international financial institutions.

Tsvangirai’s pusillanimous performance in the second round of the presidential elections seems to have convinced any potential backers in the West that he is useless for their purposes. He announced his withdrawal from the election last week with a letter to the *Guardian* in which he appealed for international military intervention. Within days he had denied that he ever sent that article to the paper. On its part the *Guardian*, while loath to discredit Tsvangirai, had to point out that they had received the article from the usual sources.

The “usual sources” turned out to be a “media consultant” who had provided 400 pieces under Tsvangirai’s byline for the *Guardian*, the *Melbourne Age* and the *Washington Post*. Inadvertently, Tsvangirai had admitted far more than he intended about the nature of his campaign and the extent to which it is run by big business interests and is far removed from the interests of the people who are being beaten and killed in Zimbabwe.



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