

# Zimbabwe: Stalemate over power-sharing deal

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Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), walked out of talks this week that were intended to set up a power-sharing government with President Robert Mugabe.

According to the South African newspaper *Business Day*, Tsvangirai refused to sign a document that would have made him prime minister with remit to manage the collapsed economy but did not contain the title "head of government." Mugabe had refused the inclusion of such a clause.

The talks were brokered by President Mbeki of South Africa. Mbeki has assured the press that the talks have not collapsed, but that Tsvangirai has asked for time to reflect on his position.

On July 21, Mugabe and Tsvangirai signed a "memorandum of understanding" in a Harare hotel committing them to talks intended to lead to "establishing the framework of an inclusive government." With the two men even shaking hands on camera, it was presented as a diplomatic success story.

A deadline of two weeks was set, but the talks have continued longer, and despite a supposed press blackout, the media were given the impression that negotiations were going well.

Mbeki and his team have promoted the possibility that as Mugabe "won" the presidential election, he would be willing to accept taking on a more ceremonial role and eventually retire, presumably with immunity from the prosecution that Western governments have threatened. Tsvangirai and the MDC leaders would be brought into the regime alongside the Zanu-PF generals.

It was always unlikely that Mugabe would just bow out after 28 years of rule, but this is apparently Mbeki's intention. Or he wants to convince the Western powers that this is what will eventually happen.

In return for bringing in Tsvangirai, the military brass and intelligence service clique that run Mugabe's regime would see economic sanctions lifted and receive aid from the West to stabilise the economy, bringing it back into the world market.

Despite their anti-imperialist rhetoric, Mugabe and the Zanu-PF leadership have no fundamental opposition to capitalism and are all wealthy businessmen in their own right. Mugabe had good relations with the West for two decades, and only fell out with the International Monetary Fund when it threatened Zanu-PF's state patronage in the late 1990s.

Zimbabwe's economic collapse has now gone so far that the government is increasingly unable to pay the security forces on whom it relies. Mugabe used up all his resources in paying the

army and police, as well as gangs of Zanu-PF "war veterans," to terrorise the population and organise a brutal clampdown on all opposition so that he could push through the rigged election poll on June 27.

Officially, the hyperinflation of Zimbabwe's currency is running at the astronomical figure of 2.2 million percent, but independent economists say it is closer to 15 million percent. The government has virtually run out of foreign currency, and industrial production is rapidly declining, with little fuel or basic commodities left. Unemployment is estimated to be over 80 percent, and many workers have left the country.

Even Zimbabwe's generals, with bank accounts around the world and income from looting the neighboring Congo, are forced to recognise that the dire state of the economy threatens their continued grip on power.

Although the United States and Western governments had become increasingly critical of Mbeki's mediation efforts, it seems that they urged Tsvangirai and the MDC—who have been backed by the West throughout—to take part in the talks. On July 15, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer said that talks between the MDC and Mugabe's Zanu-PF could succeed if they resulted in a "transitional government that could then prepare for an election so that we could get back to a democratic path."

Setting aside the hypocritical talk of democracy—the United States supports numerous African regimes with a record of brutality comparable to Mugabe's—Frazer's statement was made a few days after the US and Britain failed to get a resolution calling for more sanctions on Zimbabwe through the United Nations Security Council. The sanctions would have frozen assets belonging to Mugabe and others in his regime, as well as imposing a travel ban on Zanu-PF leaders and an international arms embargo.

It seems that the US believed, following talks at the G-8 summit, that it would get Russian support for the sanctions resolution and that China would go along with Russia. In the event, the Russian ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, made it clear that Russia had growing concern over US global ambitions and vetoed the resolution, with Chinese support.

"Recently, in the positions of a number of council member states, we have seen an ever-more-obvious attempt to take the council beyond its chartered prerogatives and beyond maintaining international peace and security," Churkin said. He insisted, along

with the Chinese ambassador, that Zimbabwe did not “pose a threat to international security” as the US was arguing to justify the sanctions, and that instead, the talks brokered by Mbeki should proceed.

Frazer’s comments show that the US had little choice other than to let the talks continue, despite previous dismissal of Mbeki’s “softly softly” approach. The talks are supported by the African Union and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), which have put intense pressure on Mugabe to accept power-sharing, mindful that the instability in Zimbabwe could spread throughout southern Africa.

There can be no doubt that China, which has an increasing interest in Zimbabwe’s mineral wealth and has good relations with Zanu-PF, will be applying pressure for some accommodation with the MDC. It is not in China’s interests to have Zimbabwe isolated from the world market. China has investments in Zimbabwe’s mining industry and has established manufacturing facilities in neighbouring Zambia. Zimbabwe, with its relatively developed economy, would have been a natural market for the electronic goods that Chinese companies are now producing just across the border.

That Tsvangirai is contemplating a deal with the Mugabe regime, even if at this stage it falls through, completely discredits the MDC as the “democratic” alternative that the Western media has promoted for the last eight years. At every stage, the MDC has insisted that its supporters, which at first included large sections of the urban working class, not take any action against Mugabe’s repression other than parliamentary voting, and instead urged them to rely on the West to intervene.

Violent attacks on MDC supporters, and on the population as a whole in areas perceived to have voted MDC, were organised after it was clear that Tsvangirai had received more votes than Mugabe in the March presidential election. But a recent report from Human Rights Watch (HRW) makes clear that such attacks did not cease after Mugabe rigged the run-off election to make sure of his victory in June. And although the July 21 memorandum of understanding pledged that the terrorising of the population would stop, it continued while Tsvangirai participated in the talks.

Non-governmental organisations have supplied HRW with details showing that in the past three months, 163 people have been killed by Zanu-PF and its allies, together with the beatings and torture of more than 5,000 people. HRW estimates that 32 people were killed after the June 27 run-off and 2 since the talks began. Camps set up to carry out the beatings and torture remain in existence, as do the militias of Zanu-PF supporters and “war veterans.”

The willingness of the MDC tops to abandon their own supporters in order to take up government office is most clearly expressed by the MDC breakaway faction led by Arthur Mutambara. The 10 parliamentary seats that Mutambara’s faction holds would allow Zanu-PF to make a majority against the rest of the MDC.

It was rumoured—and confirmed in the state-run *Herald* newspaper—that although Tsvangirai walked out of the talks, Mutambara continued to make a power-sharing deal with Mugabe. Mutambara’s MPs hastily denied the existence of a deal and

claimed it was Zanu-PF propaganda.

Earlier in the week, Mutambara was sharing the platform with Mugabe at an official commemoration ceremony for those who died in the war of liberation. Even if no deal is eventually made, Mutambara has shown his willingness to accept Mugabe’s continued authority.

Tsvangirai has also shown that his concern is not for the population or for the many thousands of ordinary working people who voted for him and his party. He represents those sections of the Zimbabwean elite that were sidelined by Mugabe and are now eager to play their part in opening up the economy to the West.

According to the *Financial Times*, two senior figures of the MDC have been holding talks with the mining group Anglo American, which is concerned that the company’s Anglo Platinum subsidiary has lost valuable mineral concessions in Zimbabwe. The MDC has promised it will hold an investment conference two months after a power-sharing government is set up and will review all mining concessions.

It should be stressed that despite Mugabe’s anti-Western rhetoric, many Western mining and other companies have continued to do business in Zimbabwe. They want all restrictions lifted so they can take full advantage of the rise in commodity prices.

The impasse over a deal between the MDC and Zanu-PF will now be considered at the SADC meeting this weekend in South Africa. Whatever emerges, there should be no illusions that such a deal will benefit the mass of the population. Opening up the economy to either Western investors or China will not provide a future for the millions who have been forced to flee the country, or benefit the mass of the impoverished and unemployed population.

Comparisons are being made between Zimbabwe and Kenya, where a power-sharing government was set up after post-election violence earlier this year. But the example of Kenya is far from promising.

Food price inflation is rising rapidly in Kenya. It was recently reported to be 44 percent. There are still up to 300,000 displaced people who have little or no prospect of returning to their homes.

The new power-sharing government has been dubbed the cabinet of 40 thieves, so blatantly have the ministers proceeded to grab the perks of office.

A successful outcome of the Zimbabwe talks would create a power-sharing government on similar lines. It would allow the MDC leaders to take a share of Zimbabwe’s mineral and agricultural wealth while leaving the majority of the population still struggling to survive.



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