Zimbabwe: MDC proceeds with power-sharing fiasco

Chris Talbot, Barry Mason
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The opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is taking part in a power-sharing government with the ruling ZANU-PF party of President Robert Mugabe. The deal was brokered by the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), led by South Africa.

This is despite the arrest last week of the MDC's deputy agriculture minister, Roy Bennett, on charges of possessing firearms with the intent to engage in "terrorism, banditry and insurgency." Bennett, a white farmer whose land was taken over by Mugabe, is a key figure in the MDC.

MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai's insistence that about 30 MDC activists and civil rights campaigners be released from jail has also been ignored.

Under the power-sharing deal, Mugabe continues as president, with Tsvangirai in the post of prime minister. The MDC has 13 cabinet ministers, including finance. A rival MDC faction led by Arthur Mutambara has 3 ministers, whilst Mugabe's Zanu-PF has 15.

Key defence and state security ministries remain in the hands of Zanu-PF, with the home ministry--responsible for the police--shared between the MDC and Zanu-PF.

Last September, a power-sharing agreement, brokered by ex-South African President Thabo Mbeki, was agreed, and photos of Mugabe and Tsvangirai shaking hands were prominent in the Western media. According to reports in the London *Times*, the negotiations were covertly supported by Washington and the US "approved the new settlement almost line by line."

Whilst the US and other Western governments would like to have removed Mugabe, they were prepared to accept the South African-led compromise as a way to re-establish stability. Offers of financial aid were discussed, with the possibility of Zimbabwe's collapsed economy returning to International Monetary Fund control and its lucrative mining sector opened up to Western investment with the help of the pro-market MDC.

However, this much-heralded deal led to months of wrangling, mainly over who would have control over the cabinet security posts.

Tsvangirai claimed that the MDC in the end agreed to compromise and enter government only to prevent Zimbabwe's complete economic collapse. This argument does not carry much weight, given the fact that the economy effectively collapsed months ago. Inflation reached 300 million percent last summer and the Zimbabwean dollar has become completely worthless. Some experts suggest that inflation has now reached 10 sextillion (billion trillion) percent.

But Tsvangirai has been forced to accept the power-sharing deal because with a deepening world recession, there was little prospect that the US or Europe would offer him tangible support. The MDC, which has always relied on the backing of the West, was left in limbo.

Finally, South African President Kgalema Motlanthe announced a "unanimous" SADC decision last month for a power-sharing government, and pressured Tsvangirai to take part, despite considerable opposition in the rest of the MDC to sharing power with no control over the security services.

One of the negotiators described the SADC session at which the compromise was worked out as a "rough and tough meeting." SADC countries Botswana, Tanzania and Zambia opposed the deal and were said to be enraged that South Africa had claimed unanimity.

In forcing through the deal, South Africa is exerting its economic might to impose a policy on its neighbours in southern Africa.

Western diplomats were privately skeptical about the agreement. When asked about the prospect of aid, one unnamed diplomat told the BBC, "No way. Not until we see a functioning government in which Morgan Tsvangirai is more than simply a junior partner."

The hand of South Africa has been demonstrated in one of Tsvangirai's first decisions as prime minister. He and MDC Finance Minister Tendai Biti are to travel to Cape Town for talks about the abolition of the Zimbabwean dollar and the possible adoption of the South African rand as the currency of Zimbabwe.

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The adoption of the rand would mean ceding control of the money supply and economic policy to South Africa.

Motlanthe made this proposal last month. So far, the MDC has been reluctant to embrace the plan. But the new government has allowed the rand and the US dollar to be used as legal tender. Both currencies have been used for some time on the black market.

The new government moved quickly to ensure the loyalty of the army. Every soldier immediately received US$100. Other public employees, such as teachers, civil servants, water workers and hospital staff, will receive the same amount in the next few days. Many public employees have been on strike demanding payment in dollars because their Zimbabwean-denominated salaries have become worthless.

What is not clear is where the finance ministry got the US$70 million necessary. Biti claims he "juggled the books" to find it. A more likely source seems to be South Africa.

Zimbabwe, with a workforce that is now reduced to conditions of poverty, offers an attractive prospect for South African and other international companies, especially in the mining sector. This is a country with valuable supplies of important minerals such as chromium, gold, silver, platinum, copper and asbestos. It has, in addition, rich farmland which has become an increasingly desirable asset, as international investors move to buy up agricultural land globally.

Whatever the source of Biti's funds, his payout is an expedient that cannot be continued indefinitely, or probably even repeated. With 130,000 people on the payroll, Biti needs a more permanent solution, and what has been called the "randification" of the economy may seem an attractive option.

Biti called on the doctors, nurses, teachers and other public sector workers who have been on strike for months to return to work. Schools have stayed closed this term because teachers cannot afford to get to work or feed their families with salaries that are worthless. Hospitals are understaffed and struggling to cope with a cholera epidemic that has already claimed 3,000 lives.

Starvation and malnutrition are on the increase, with up to 7 million people--more than two thirds of those left in the country--reliant on food aid. According to the *Guardian*, "new food aid has all but dried up as the Western financial crisis bites and donors hesitate to pour in more money… rations for most people have been cut to about 600 calories a day, less than the minimum required to keep an adult alive." The harvest this year is likely to be the worst in decades.

The MDC's dollar payout may bring some people back to work. But it is not a solution to the collapse of the country's social infrastructure, which was once among the most developed in Africa. South Africa may make a US$1 billion assistance package available. That sum will be far less than the estimated US$5 billion reconstruction costs required.

It is questionable how long the power-sharing government can survive. Elements in ZANU-PF opposed to Mugabe are said to be angry that Motlanthe's deal has given the aging president a new lease on life. Top army chiefs refused to attend Tsvangirai's swearing-in ceremony.

The Joint Operational Command (JOC), which masterminded the arrest, torture and murder of MDC supporters, is supposed to have been dissolved. But it appears still to be operational. It is thought to have been responsible for the arrest of Roy Bennett.

Tsvangirai has appealed to Motlanthe to put pressure on Mugabe to release Bennett and other jailed MDC members. Mugabe himself may not be able to do so, even if he were willing.

The UK-based *Independent* says of the JOC, "The body was formally dissolved under the new government and is supposed to be replaced by a National Security Council. However, leading JOC figures… have no intention of seeing their power diluted and have moved aggressively against the new administration."

According to the *Observer*, "Its five members, who vet everything from the daily front-page story in the *Herald* newspaper to monetary policy… are the most powerful men in the country."

The article went on to quote an African diplomat: "[The JOC] wants to send the signal that MDC should not think that being in government offers it any sort of protection."

The *Economist* points to rumours of a coup, with a "cabal of leaders of the army, the police, the prisons and intelligence services… holding daily meetings at a farm near Harare, where arms were said to be cached."

What can be concluded from these reports is that the situation in Zimbabwe is highly unstable and that the formation of the power-sharing government has resolved nothing. The new government is at war with itself. Those conflicts may yet break out into the open.

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