Zimbabwe’s government cracks down on protest over fuel price increase

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Following the 2017 ousting of Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe finds itself in even more political turmoil than in the weeks leading up to the coup which removed the longtime president from political power. Current president Emmerson Mnangagwa, having survived an assassination attempt in 2018, finds himself at the head of a government that is increasingly viewed with hostility by the Zimbabwean population.

After protests saw the death of several civilians in 2018, the Zimbabwean government has ushered in the new year by once again cracking down violently on protests against the current economic malaise in the country.

Al Jazeera reported Tuesday that dozens of people had been injured and five killed after protests broke out across the country during the second day of a three-day national strike. Hundreds have been arrested. Many Zimbabweans stayed home during the strike, resulting in the closure of many schools.

Protests have been met with violent reprisals by government forces and the arrest of hundreds across the country. The government also shut down the internet, a move which Doug Coltart, a lawyer who spoke to detainees in Harare, explained to the *Guardian* was clearly being “[used] to cover up a massive operation of repression” against the Zimbabwean population.

The demonstrations come in response to a 150 percent fuel price increase announced by the Mnangagwa government last weekend. The hike in fuel prices makes Zimbabwe the country with the world’s most expensive petrol and diesel prices, adding even more fuel to an already explosive situation.

As Derek Matyszak a political analyst at the Institute for Security Studies told CNN: “This unrest was a slow train that has been coming for some time ... and the fuel price hike was the straw that broke the camel's back.”

The ousting of Mugabe, which was sold as the dawn of a prosperous new Zimbabwe, has instead ushered in violent reprisal and repression by the Mnangagwa government.

That this is so, however, should not shock the politically astute. The rise to power of Mnangagwa, who was himself a crucial cog in the wheel of the Mugabe government, simply amounted to a changing of the guard as opposed to a formidable revolution of the working class—itself the social force most concerned and affected by the steep rise in fuel prices and the other effects of the economic crisis.

The three-day “national strike,” which was called from Monday by the unions, signifies the growing consciousness of the working class to its individual interests and the acute danger of the situation. These strikes, however, will only be met with more repression and austerity by Mnangagwa who, after all, declared that Zimbabwe is “open for business,” a statement which can only mean the further suppression of wages—ergo a drop in living standards, in order to make Zimbabwe more attractive for “investment”—a call to the rapaciousness of international capital.

A growing shortage in food and basic necessities dictates an even deeper dive into martial law by Mnangagwa’s government.

Amid all this, the fatal casualties being tallied by the violence of the police and military repudiates any hope that Mnangagwa, and indeed the entire ruling elite of the ZANU-PF, has any intention to hear the cries of the protesting Zimbabweans.

The disproportionate use of violence by Mnangagwa, and indeed the ZANU-PF leadership, is not out of scope. The penchant for violence in this layer of the ruling elite is only beginning to rear its ugly head in these killings. Mnangagwa’s own history in ZANU-PF

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is a reminder of the ability for the Zimbabwean ruling elite to use tremendous violence to suppress popular opposition.

Between 1983 and 1987, while he was minister of national security, Mnangagwa was one of the ZANU-PF leaders responsible for what is now known as the *Gukurahundi* massacre. The massacre, which was largely undertaken to suppress opposition and dissidents both within the party, but mainly outside it, against Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), was undertaken to secure an unchallenged victory in the 1985 election—five years after Zimbabwean independence—for Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF.

As Stuart Doran, an independent historian, commenting on recently discovered documents that point to the direct complicity of Mugabe and the leaders of ZANU-PF in the massacre, notes, "[t]he documents point to internal killings neither provoked nor sustained by outsiders, suggesting that the atrocities were driven from the top by Zanu-PF in pursuit of specific political objectives.

"Viewed across a period of several years, the documents appear to provide evidence that the massacres were but one component of a sustained and strategic effort to remove all political opposition within five years of independence. Zanu-PF leaders were determined to secure a 'victory' against a non-existent opposition in elections scheduled for 1985, after which there would be a 'mandate' from the people to impose a one-party state."

The *Gukurahundi*, sustained over a period of five years, resulted in the deaths of nearly 20,000 people by conservative estimates.

In a recent statement on the protests that have shaken the country over the past few days Owen Ncube, the minister of state for national security, claimed that "[t]he prevailing security situation in the country is a culmination of a well-orchestrated series of events by the MDC Alliance, working in cahoots with NGOs, civic society, youth organisations, pressure groups and individuals."

The interests of the working class are directly hostile to the MDC, itself a bourgeois party.

However, the grave implications of the statement by Ncube, point in clear view—considering the history above—of the mindset, and, one might cautiously add, intentions of the leadership of the ZANU-PF. They intend once again to violently and forcibly suppress opposition and cover this over either as being a "conspiracy of the west" or a justified response in opposition to one.

The willingness to use extreme violence and force by the ZANU-PF leadership to consolidate its rule and retain power has been borne out in history. One mustn't take the historical nature of these events and see them as things only capable in a backwater and backward past. The same motivations for wanton state violence still exist today as they did during the *Gukurahundi* massacre. The danger is real and imminent.

The Zimbabwean working class must make haste, therefore. Ominous dark days may be just over the horizon.

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