Zimbabwe: Mnangagwa government clamps down on popular opposition

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The economic situation in Zimbabwe continues to worsen, with food shortages, high fuel prices, and a currency shortage exacerbating an already tense social crisis.

The scale of the crisis is immense. The *Independent Online* reports that more than half of the population in rural areas faces hunger, a significant increase compared to less than 30 percent just last year. In the capital, Harare, 52 percent of residents are facing food insecurity.

According to the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee's 2018 Rural Livelihoods Assessment, approximately 2.4 million people in rural Zimbabwe—approximately 28 percent of the rural population—will be severely food insecure by March 2019. The prices of basic services and commodities have risen at a cumulative rate of over 500 percent.

The currency shortage plaguing the Zimbabwean economy exposes many more to financial hardship and economic insecurity, driving them into unemployment. Last year, for example, thousands of RioZim workers were forced to go for months without pay before being put on forced leave by the mining company, after it shut-down three of its mines.

The ZANU-PF government, led by a ruling clique that is hermitically sealed off from the mass of ordinary people by its colossal wealth, has responded to the social discontent created by these conditions by unleashing the military to suppress any signs of dissent and keep the population in a permanent state of fear. Reports by human rights groups detail wanton acts of torture, assault and sexual assault by the army. Victims describe chilling stories of men in army uniforms and black masks raiding their homes and raping them.

The government has reinforced the presence of the army on the streets and suburbs of the capital in what amounts to martial law. According to *Bulawayo24*, "There are reports of soldiers patrolling most high-density suburbs, with details of forced curfews in place. Coupled with this is the continuous nightly crackdown on civilians, opposition party and civic society members who are on police wanted list."

Notwithstanding this intimidation, the working class has expressed its determination to fight. Teachers—reflecting the wave of teachers' strikes that have taken place over four continents—have been in the lead of this militancy with 80 percent of over 100,000 Zimbabwean teachers going on strike for higher wages February 5 after the breakdown of negotiations between the government and public-sector workers.

Strikes were met with intimidation by ZANU-PF youth, war veterans and supporters and the police.

However, a forced return to the classroom was achieved not by these reactionary forces but by the main teachers' unions, the Zimbabwe Teachers Association and the Progressive Teachers' Union, who urged the government to take advantage of the "detente to introspect and come up with well thought out, meaningful, and long-lasting solutions on the salaries grievances."

The actions by the teachers' unions are in line with the general strategy of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), which is in political alliance with the pro-imperialist Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The MDC utilizes the backing of the ZCTU to place pressure on ZANU-PF, while working in alliance with British and US imperialism.

Exposing the anti-working class character of the MDC, and its own nationalistic and militaristic chauvinism, MDC Alliance president Nelson Chamisa made a direct appeal for support from the army, stating that "We love our soldiers, we honour our soldiers; they are patriotic; but, honestly, why are politicians abusing our soldiers to draw them into issues that are not supposed to be theirs?"

Recent statements by MDC councilor of Kwekwe, Washington Moyo, again underscore the reactionary and militaristic agenda of the MDC. Speaking at a council meeting on the issue of "street vendors" (marketers who are unable to sell their goods anywhere else other than the streets of Harare), Moyo, according to the *Zimbabwe Mail*, remarked, "I think it's a waste of time to dispatch our security personnel on the ground to chase away vendors from the streets because the moment they leave, vendors will

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come back," before stating that "Under the circumstances, I think it's prudent that we engage the army. I suggest that we use the army to bring sanity to our city."

The deposing of President Robert Mugabe in November 2017 in a military coup led by his former enforcer and now President Emmerson Mnangagwa aroused hopes for change not only among the Zimbabwean population but also within imperialist circles.

The major powers are seeking to bring about a reorientation of the ZANU-PF government away from Russia and China and for the opening up of the economy to western transnationals. However, Mnangagwa continues to seek closer ties with Moscow and Beijing which offer the possibility of investment without further financial indebtedness to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The MDC acts as a local tool of the imperialist powers in pressuring ZANU-PF into changing course or, if necessary, working towards regime change. Notably, proposed talks with Mnangagwa were snubbed by Chamisa against a background of threats of further sanctions by Washington and London.

Britain's Minister for Africa, Harriet Baldwin, said the Conservative government is considering widening sanctions on the Zimbabwean government in the aftermath of the repression of protests. *Business Day* reports her as saying, "I think that since the recent developments there might be a case for widening it to include further individuals … We have been aware that the president has said that heads will roll. We haven't seen any specific heads rolling."

According to *Business Live*, US State Department spokesperson Robert Palladino expressed the Trump administration's concerns about "excessive use of force by the government of Zimbabwe's security forces and the imposition of undue internet restrictions." Palladino called for dialogue between MDC and ZANU-PF, before insisting that talks must be "mediated by a neutral third party" and calling for "the government of Zimbabwe to enact promised political and economic reforms."

MDC spokesperson Jacob Mafume noted his party's alignment with the Trump administration's position stating, "The US's articulation of a dialogue process and what is needed to bring peace to Zimbabwe is very clear and more pointed."

On February 14, the European Parliament also recommended the tightening of sanctions first imposed by the European Union in 2002 on senior Zimbabwe officials and institutions, citing the Mnangagwa government's "continued attacks, hate speech, smear campaigns, acts of intimidation and harassment and… acts of torture." Presently, out of an initial 200 targets, only seven people and one entity remain subject to sanctions, which are due to expire February 20.

Despite the threats of new sanctions, Mnangagwa seems intent on clamping down even harder on the MDC, with the *Guardian* reporting, "Briefing papers prepared by Zanu-PF officials blame opposition parties and 'rogue NGOs' for 'an orgy of violence' following a protest against fuel price rises last month, accusing them of following a plan 'by hostile elements to subvert the state by rendering the country ungovernable.'"

The *Guardian* adds, "The Zanu-PF document describes the security forces' response as 'proportional to the threat posed', though it adds: 'Unfortunately some misguided elements within the system and the security forces committed excesses and the law is now taking its course.' The briefing says reports of abuses are aimed at prompting western intervention in Zimbabwe."

Mnangagwa circulated these documents among African Union foreign diplomats to build a support base against the western powers. *TimesLive* reports, "Botswana [has become] the latest Sadc [South African Development Community] member state to throw its weight behind Mnangagwa's government, asking the US and other Western countries to remove sanctions against Zimbabwe. Botswana's president, Eric Masisi said the sanctions were preventing Zimbabwe from growing."

It goes on to say, "[E]arlier this week, Sadc chair and Namibian president Hage Geingob also pledged support to Mnangagwa, saying: 'Sadc expresses its solidarity with the government and the people of the Republic of Zimbabwe, and calls upon the international community to unconditionally lift all sanctions imposed on the country.'"

With the support of the army, representing a bourgeois constituency that does not want to be displaced by international capital, Mnangagwa is attempting to maneuver between the imperialist powers and Russia and China, while continuing to clamp down on all opposition. The working class must wage a struggle against Mnangagwe without being corralled behind the pro-imperialist opposition represented by the MDC/ZCTU.

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