

Zimbabwe: Government repression as social unrest mounts

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The ZANU-PF government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa has deployed the police and military to shut down the capital Harare, having ordered people to stay indoors ahead of rallies planned for July 31.

In Bulawayo, the streets were equally deserted with only security forces seen roaming the city centre.

The security forces have arrested dozens of opposition critics, including one involved in organising the rallies, and journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, investigating corruption allegations involving Health Minister Obadiah Moyo. More than a dozen others were forced into hiding.

The pro-imperialist Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC-A) and smaller opposition parties had called the rallies opposing the deteriorating economic situation, the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, rampant corruption, and the wave of arrests and abductions over the last few months.

While the main rally could not go ahead, the security forces arrested dozens of people participating in smaller protests, including Fadzayi Mahere, spokeswoman of the MDC-Tsvangirai, and the prominent author Tsitsi Dangarembga, whose new book *This Mournable Body* has been long-listed for the Booker Prize.

Security forces also kidnapped Tawanda Muchehiwa, a 22-year-old student and nephew of Mduduzi Mathuthu, editor of the newspaper *Zim Live*, and two other relatives, after a raid by armed men—believed to be Zimbabwe Police—did not find Mathuthu at home.

While Muchehiwa's relatives were released without charge, Tawanda was later dumped near his home after being severely tortured. Doctors who treated him said they were “alarmed” by the extent of his injuries that included deep cuts and severe kidney damage.

This follows a spate of arrests and kidnappings by plainclothes government thugs that began in May, giving the lie to the claims that Mnangagwa, one of long-time ruler Robert Mugabe's closest political associates who

succeeded him in 2017 after a military coup, would bring an end to tyranny, corruption, and social misery.

The Mnangagwa government's assault on democratic rights has given rise to mounting opposition, to the extent that it has been necessary to deny that the military that brought it to power was plotting a second coup. Last month, security forces in the Joint Operations Command (JOC) made up of heads and senior personnel of the military, police, and secret services sidelined the government and shut down mobile money transactions and the stock exchange, amid charges they were being used for black-market activities, collapsing an already falling currency.

Mnangagwa, speaking on television Tuesday, threatened opposition figures and human rights campaigners, condemning the planned protests as the “machinations of destructive, terrorist opposition groupings.” He pledged that “security services will continue to carry out their duties with appropriate astuteness and resolve.”

Officials from his ruling ZANU-PF party, which has encouraged greater investment and trade with China, have portrayed the planned rallies as a Western plot, calling US Ambassador Brian Nichols a “thug” and suggesting that he might be expelled for criticising the government's response to the protests.

With the ongoing collapse of the currency against the dollar, foreign currency reserves are vanishing. According to *Bloomberg*, following the removal of Old Mutual from the stock market, which paved the way for the reopening of the stock market on August 3, the main index tumbled 4.5 percent.

The annual rate of inflation has shot up to 800 percent, devaluing already paltry wages and making basic commodities unaffordable. The price of fuel has gone up 150 percent and there are severe shortages of basic household goods. Some 90 percent of Zimbabweans work

as day labourers in the informal sector that has been devastated by the lockdowns and curfews.

The economic situation has been exacerbated by US and European Union sanctions, maintained since 2003. The sanctions and restrictions target specific individuals, including Mnangagwa, and some 56 companies and organisations, making it difficult for Zimbabwe to obtain loans.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that the economy will contract by 10 percent this year. The World Food Programme (WFP) is appealing to donors for \$250 million to prevent 8.6 million people—a staggering 60 percent of the population—becoming food-insecure this year due to the pandemic, drought, and the dire economic situation.

WFP Regional Director for Southern Africa Lola Castro said, “Many Zimbabwean families are suffering the ravages of acute hunger, and their plight will get worse before it gets better.”

So far, the country has recorded more than 4,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 80 deaths, both likely to be a vast underestimate. Parliament was forced to suspend sessions recently after two legislators and a driver and journalist travelling with them tested positive.

A leading secret service official and the agriculture minister, former Air Marshal Perrance Shiri, have both died of the coronavirus. Shiri played a major role in the planning of the Gukurahundi massacres, carried out by Mugabe’s ZANU forces against his ZAPU opponents in Matabeleland, that killed 20,000, commanding the Fifth Brigade responsible for widespread torture and mass executions.

Health care conditions are atrocious. There are serious shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect medical staff, and a lack of key drugs and blood supplies.

Last week, pictures released by Dr. Peter Magombeyi, the former head of the doctors’ union, showing the bodies of seven stillborn babies at Harare Central Hospital caused widespread horror. He tweeted, “We have been robbed of our future, including our unborn babies. Please stop the looting.” One doctor told the BBC the deaths were just “the tip of the iceberg.”

Mnangagwa was forced to sack Health Minister Obadiah Moyo following his involvement in a corruption scandal—revealed by detained journalist Hopewell Chi’nono. Moyo had awarded a \$60 million contract to an unknown company that had overcharged the government for COVID-19 medical supplies. Moyo is to

be replaced with a military doctor, Air Commodore Jasper Chimedza.

At Mpilo Central Hospital in Bulawayo, a further 32 nurses have tested positive for COVID-19, while across the city 115 nurses have tested positive, as have 300 nurses nationwide. Nurses have been on strike for 46 days, demanding PPE and calling for their salaries to be paid in US dollars. They have vowed to continue their strike until their demands are met.

While the Health Services Board maintains that the nurses’ month-long strike is illegal, the government is trying to recruit more nurses to break the strike. Information Minister Monica Mutsvangwa said, “More nurses will be urgently recruited from the available pool of qualified nurses, while processes to resolve those on industrial action continue.”

Doctors have also downed tools, demanding their salaries be paid in US dollars, which the government derided as “insane.” Zimbabwe Doctors for Human Rights Secretary-General Norman Matara responded with fury to Mnangagwa’s demand that they return to work and sacrifice their lives for the “national interest.” He said, “Health workers cannot work on empty stomachs and without protective clothing simply because they save lives.”

The ZANU-PF government has caused outrage for signing an agreement with white farmers, whose lands were seized by Mugabe’s government, awarding them \$3.5 billion in compensation even as the health care system is in complete collapse with nurses being paid as little as US\$30 a month and the country is in the midst of a dire economic crisis. Mnangagwa said of the signing, “This momentous event is historic. It brings closure and a new beginning.”



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