

On March 29, 2008, Zimbabwe held presidential and parliamentary elections that appear to have ousted revolutionary hero-turned dictator Robert Mugabe and his party from power. However, the government's delay of the official results leaves the final result uncertain and the tension high. Regardless of the final outcome, the risk for a violent response makes for an unstable environment in Zimbabwe. Stay tuned to this page for frequent updates and background on the situation.



By CCD Program Officer Daniel Hollingsworth
Updated April 3, 2008

Robert Mugabe has ruled Zimbabwe since coming to power as Prime Minister in 1980. BBC's country profile of Zimbabwe writes of Mugabe, "Ideologically, Mr. Mugabe belongs to the African liberationist tradition of the 1960s - strong and ruthless leadership, anti-Western, suspicious of capitalism and deeply intolerant of dissent and opposition." He immediately set out to establish a one-party state in Zimbabwe and did so violently, crushing political opposition and anyone suspected of supporting it. In 1987, he was declared executive president by parliament; his reelection in 1990 was entirely rejected by outside observers, but no significant threat to his power existed. However, as economic conditions rapidly deteriorated, Mugabe began to see opposition mount. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was founded in 1999, and it helped mobilize opposition to a 2000 referendum that would have greatly expanded Mugabe's powers; the result was Mugabe's first political defeat. MDC increasingly gained support within the country and from those who were forced out by Mugabe's disastrous policies. In the weeks leading up to the 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections, observers began to speculate that the MDC may actually have a chance to defeat Mugabe and his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). While results remained uncertain in the days following the election, the MDC claimed both a majority in the Parliament and that its leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, had been elected the new President of Zimbabwe.

The Rise of Mugabe and the One-Party State

In 1961, just days after the colonial government of Rhodesia banned the National Democratic Party, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) was created to lead the Zimbabwean liberation movement. ZAPU was led by Joseph Nkomo, and its leadership included a 37-year old Robert Mugabe as its information and publicity secretary. A combination of political and personal disagreements led to the establishment in 1963 of the offshoot Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), and Mugabe was among those who split off to this new organization, which often competed with ZAPU for popular support. In 1964, Mugabe was arrested by the Rhodesian government and sentenced to ten years in prison. Mugabe's time in prison burnished his reputation within the liberation movement, and following a no-confidence vote in ZANU's previous leader, Ndabaningi Sithole, Mugabe was elected while still in prison in 1974 as the new head of the organization. Upon his release, Mugabe operated ZANU out of Mozambique, while Nkomo and ZAPU worked out of Zambia. Both ZAPU and ZANU operated military wings, which conducted continuous attacks beginning in 1972 against the colonial government.

In 1976, due to a combination of pressure from economic sanctions, the guerilla campaign, and the recently-gained independence of several of Rhodesia's neighbors, Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith convened a meeting in Geneva with leaders of the Zimbabwean liberation movement to negotiate a transfer from white rule. Mugabe and Nkomo represented their respective organizations, while Sithole, who had established a moderate faction of ZANU, and Bishop Abel Muzorewa of the United African National Council (UANC) presented a more moderate face in Geneva, as both had renounced violence in the liberation efforts. While unsuccessful, the Geneva meeting established the legitimacy of majority rule, and movement toward a transfer of power continued. In 1978, an "internal settlement," which provided for majority rule and universal suffrage, was reached between Smith and the moderate leaders, while Mugabe and Nkomo rejected the agreement. Elections were held under the terms of the settlement, and Bishop Muzorewa was elected as Prime Minister of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia in April 1979. However, the rejection of

the agreement by ZANU and ZAPU meant that the violence continued, and the internal settlement was ultimately ineffective.

In September 1979, the British government under Margaret Thatcher helped to negotiate a new constitution and new elections, and in December, Zimbabwe-Rhodesia briefly returned to British authority and Murozewa accepted new elections for early 1980. This time, Mugabe and Nkomo saw an opportunity to finally gain full independence for Zimbabwe, and they agreed to join forces as the Patriotic Front, taking the names ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU for their respective parties in the election. The ZANU-PF party gained a majority in the February 1980 election and formed the first independent government of Zimbabwe with Mugabe as Prime Minister.

Mugabe initially made reconciliation with the white leadership and white community a key goal of his policy, retaining several former officials in his cabinet and seeking to reassure the white business community that his policies would encourage foreign investment and development along capitalist lines. Martin Meredith writes,

“He even kept in place the head of intelligence, Ken Flower, who had previously spent considerable effort trying to organize Mugabe’s assassination. At one of their first meetings in Mugabe’s office, Flower was anxious to explain about the various attempts the Rhodesians had made to kill him, to ensure that Mugabe was fully informed about his background. But Mugabe simply laughed. ‘Yes, but they all failed, otherwise we would not be here together,’ he remarked.”

However, Mugabe did not extend similar cordiality to his black rivals. Despite agreeing, with strong encouragement from the British, to cooperate with Nkomo and ZAPU to form a coalition government, he quickly made clear his aims to establish a one-party state, and ZAPU stood in the way of this goal.

“At a political rally in November 1980 in Nkomo’s stronghold of Bulawayo, [Mugabe’s close ally Enos] Nkala denounced ZAPU as ‘the enemy’ and called on ZANU-PF supporters to mount what he called a general mobilization. ‘Organise yourselves into small groups in readiness to challenge ZAPU on its home ground. If it means a few blows, we shall deliver them.’”

Following this rally, and again in 1981, violent clashes between supporters of the rival groups erupted, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Then, in 1982, Mugabe accused Nkomo of plotting to overthrow the government and expelled him from the cabinet after security officials found weapons in the homes of ZAPU members.

This continuing rivalry between ZANU-PF and ZAPU resulted in a campaign of violent attacks on government officials that continued until 1987. In response, Mugabe organized the *Gukurahundi* brigade, meaning “the rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains,” which had been trained with assistance from the North Korean military. The *Gukurahundi* targeted the civilian population in Matabeleland suspected to be supportive of ZAPU; estimates for the number of civilian deaths range from 10 to 30 thousand from 1983-1987. Mugabe ordered the closing of ZAPU offices and banned all ZAPU rallies. In December 1987, Mugabe’s aims were achieved, as he and Nkomo signed a Unity Accord that merged ZAPU with Mugabe’s ZANU-PF, effectively establishing the one party state Mugabe had long sought.

Land Reform, Economic Disaster, and a Defeat for Mugabe

By brutally stifling his political opposition, Mugabe also lost any goodwill he may have preserved in the remaining white community. He and Ian Smith had last met in 1981, when Smith’s criticism of Mugabe’s desire for a one-party state ended any relationship between the two. When, in 1985, the white community voted for Smith as one of their representatives, Mugabe branded them racists and traitors, vowing to “kill the snakes among us.”

Upon his election as Prime Minister, Mugabe had made land reform a central policy. This was initially seen as a worthy project; it involved supporting the resettlement of families from drought-stricken and over-populated areas to more fertile land that had been abandoned by white farmers during the violence leading up to independence. Meredith writes that the program, which was assisted by funding from the British, “represented only a preliminary step in tackling the land issue, but Mugabe was precluded from taking more radical measures by a constitutional

agreement lasting for ten years after independence stipulating that land transactions could only be conducted on a willing-seller willing-buyer basis.”

Progress on land reform moved slowly, and as the expiration of the agreement coincided with new elections in 1990, Mugabe was presented an opportunity to both generate electoral support and indulge his antipathy toward the white community. He announced a plan to forcibly redistribute 13 million acres of farmland owned by whites to peasant farmers, and parliament passed an amendment to this end. Aside from the outrage this provoked in the white community and in the rest of the world, it also was beset by scandal when the extent to which this program was benefitting Mugabe and his government was discovered. Investigations in 1994 “revealed that some 300 farms intended for resettlement had been handed out to ministers and senior officials...in many cases for nominal rent and in some cases for no rent at all.”

While those connected to Mugabe were seeing these spoils, the rest of Zimbabwe was falling deeper into despair. Unemployment and massive inflation were taking their toll, and popular discontent continued to grow. Demonstrations by war veterans in 1997 represented the most visible challenge yet to Mugabe, and in his eagerness to retain the support of one of the groups most loyal to him, he pledged a massive benefit package, and dismissed concerns over the costs of such a program. When the World Bank cut off its lending to Zimbabwe, Mugabe announced plans to expropriate half of the farmland in the country, and the stock exchange quickly collapsed.

Mugabe desperately sought a way to generate funding, but each time provoked a backlash: “Protesting against his proposals to impose new taxes and levies... trade unions organized a national strike, bringing many towns to a halt. A series of food price increases in 1998 provoked riots.” When an international donor conference convened to seek a solution to the crisis, leading donor countries insisted upon instituting careful oversight of any land reform program they would support, and the agreement they eventually reached was never initiated by Mugabe.

Instead, Mugabe crafted a new strategy to enhance his executive power through a national referendum in early 2000. The referendum would formalize the personal powers he had accumulated since 1980; grant immunity from prosecution to the government and military; and allow Mugabe to expropriate farmland without compensation. In response to pressure from the newly-formed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) to prevent Mugabe from running for another term as president, the referendum would also limit the president to two five-year terms, but because it was not retroactive, it would allow Mugabe to legally serve as president for ten more years. Despite threats of reprisal to anyone who opposed the referendum, for the first time, a coordinated opposition, led by MDC with the support of human rights and church organizations, was able to hand Mugabe a defeat at the polls, as 55 percent voted ‘no’ on the referendum.

The Emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change

The defeat of the 2000 referendum established the Movement for Democratic Change as the primary opposition movement in Zimbabwe. Led by former trade union leader Morgan Tsvangirai, the MDC was accused of being a tool of white interests seeking to undermine the country by Mugabe, who promised “The MDC will never form the government of this country, never ever, not in my lifetime or even after I die.” Massive voter intimidation took place in the run-up to the June 2000 parliamentary elections, but despite widespread pronouncements that the election was not free and fair, ZANU-PF won only a narrow victory with 63 seats to MDC’s 57.

With Presidential elections on the horizon in 2002, Mugabe stepped up his attacks. He accused the MDC of being a conspiracy of all his former enemies, calling it “a counter-revolutionary Trojan-horse contrived and nurtured by the very inimical forces that enslaved and oppressed our people yesterday.” Still, momentum against him continued to build. When he attempted to accelerate the land resettlement program, the Commercial Farmers Union appealed to the Supreme Court, which ruled the program illegal. His campaign for the 2002 election was steeped in military language, and MDC officials were beaten, tortured, and killed. The 2002 elections were blatantly rigged, with an inflated turnout in the rural regions where ZANU-PF was strongest, and Mugabe was declared the winner with 56 percent of the vote.

After 2002, Mugabe set out to restore his grip on power in the country. Legislation was passed to curtail free speech, freedom of the press, and free assembly. MDC leaders, including Tsvangirai, were tried for treason, but acquitted. Local and parliamentary by-elections in 2002 and 2003 were marred with substantial violence. Operation Murambatsvina ("Restore Order") was launched in May 2005 "to rid urban areas of illegal structures, illegal business enterprises, and criminal activities," and between May and July, 700,000 people lost their homes in the operation.

Entering the 2008 elections, the economic plight of Zimbabwe was staggering. The annual rate of inflation had surpassed 100,000%; since 1999, total output has decreased by 35%. An estimated 3.5 million people have fled Zimbabwe as a result of the political and economic crisis.

As the election approached, signs that the election would likely be rigged reemerged, as voter registration records were found to include many deceased individuals and the availability of polling stations favored the rural areas. Still, the campaign was surprisingly peaceful, and speculation emerged that MDC may have a legitimate chance. After the vote, several independent projections have predicted that Tsvangirai defeated Mugabe, but official results have been withheld. The response of the government remains to be seen, and until then nothing can be assured.

Sources:

[BBC Country Profile: Zimbabwe](#)

[State Department Background Notes: Zimbabwe](#)

Meredith, Martin. 2005. *The Fate of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*. New York: Public Affairs.

[The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and the Legal Resources Foundation – *Breaking the Silence, Building the Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988.*](#)