

Fixing Zimbabwe

Even if Robert Mugabe steps aside, unpicking the damage done to Zimbabwe's political fabric will be a complex task.

By Ayesha Kajee in Harare (AR No. 104, 22-Mar-07)

Zimbabwe is in a state of economic and political chaos. Annual inflation is soaring above 1,700 per cent so that shops change their prices daily or even hourly, the official exchange rate is laughably unrealistic compared with trading on the black market, and unemployment tops 80 per cent.

Add to that the heavy security presence - by 5.30 in the evening, there are clusters of helmeted, baton-toting police on nearly every street corner, in the wake of the violence and mayhem that erupted when security forces broke up a mass prayer meeting on March 11.

But ordinary Zimbabweans in Harare seem to shrug off their troubles and soldier on. So what makes the current political and economic situation any different from that before the 2005 elections, when I last visited Harare?

One difference is that public-sector workers are now part of the protests – teachers, nurses and municipal civil servants have joined trade unionists, youth groups and women's movements because they have not been paid for months.

Rank-and-file members in the security forces are also showing signs of financial and physical strain, as evidenced by reports that members of the presidential guard took potshots at State House earlier this year.

Perhaps the biggest difference of all, though, is that even former loyalists within the ruling ZANU-PF party are distancing themselves from President Robert Mugabe because of his avowed intention to delay the next election and remain in power till 2010.

The disaffected include Vice-President Joice Mujuru, whose husband, Solomon Mujuru, led the army until 1995 and is rumoured to retain significant influence in the security forces.

Solomon Mujuru apparently relishes the role of kingmaker, since he was instrumental in getting the pro-independence guerillas to accept Mugabe as their leader after he was released from jail. In what has been widely regarded as a lobbying campaign for the succession, Mujuru has been wooing foreign diplomats. His meetings with the United States, French and British ambassadors have provoked Mugabe to rail against "ambitious leaders [who] have been cutting deals with the British and Americans".

The other major contender for Zimbabwe's hot seat is Emmerson Mnangagwa, currently the rural housing minister and formerly a widely-feared intelligence chief, who still commands support in the secret police.

Both the Mujuru and Mnangagwa factions distrust Mugabe, and the president's increasing isolation within his own party may be the final nail in a coffin that he has been fashioning for some time.

Even if Mugabe loses support to the extent that he is prevented from contesting a presidential election near, and from postponing the ballot until 2010, neither of the two potential heirs commands sufficient support to win an outright majority within ZANU-PF.

And while both Joice Mujuru and Mnangagwa fought in the independence struggle, neither has the presence and almost mythic stature that has allowed Mugabe to rally the rural masses in the past.

If Mugabe goes, a fracture within the ruling party is more than possible. Given that the opposition is also fractured into two camps, this does not augur well for political stability in the immediate post-Mugabe transition period.

At a conference on elections and democracy held in Harare last week, Koki Muli, a speaker from Kenya, cautioned Zimbabweans against believing the removal of Mugabe would of itself bring an end to their problems.

"I am sad and very worried that this country is making the same mistake that we made in Kenya in 2002," she said.

"When [President Daniel Arap] Moi went, we realised too late that it was not enough... It is important to have an agenda to move forward."

Muli added that Zimbabweans from across the political spectrum would need to work together to rebuild their economy and political institutions.

Most Zimbabwean analysts and activists to whom this writer has spoken agree that removing Mugabe is only the first step, and concede that a transitional government with a caretaker president - neither Mujuru nor Mnangagwa - is probably the best way forward.

During the transitional period, they say, the legal infrastructure must be overhauled, and a constitutional review and the repeal of restrictive laws should be high on the agenda. The institutions of democracy such as the Electoral Commission must also be re-invented so as to guarantee their independence and autonomy before proceeding with elections.

But many Zimbabweans believe they need an independent broker to help with this transition, as the boundaries of state and party have become insidiously intertwined. In the words of one member of parliament, "In Zimbabwe the ruling party is married to all state institutions... we need a divorce lawyer to dissolve this marriage."

Of course, all this is based on the assumption that faced with a show of no-confidence from within his party, Mugabe will actually concede defeat and make way for a successor. Given his feisty character and his Houdini-like ability to escape from seemingly impossible tight corners, observers warn that he should not be written off too lightly.

"He may decide to anoint a weak successor and continue to be the puppet-master, like his friend [Sam] Nujoma," said one, referring to the former Namibian president who anointed Hifikepunye Pohamba as his successor.

Such successors, however, do not always prove to be the puppets that their predecessors expected. Zambian president Levy Mwanawasa's decision to approve the prosecution of former President Frederick Chiluba on corruption charges is a case in point. So is Malawian president Bingu wa Mutharika's break with ex-leader Bakili Muluzi, who had handpicked him as successor in the face of fierce protests from his party.

If Mugabe does continue to influence the presidency from behind the scenes, there are those who fear his Machiavellian mindset may cause him to keep Zimbabwe teetering on a political and economic precipice.

"It would be best for Zimbabweans if he were to leave the country, but he'll never agree," said one commentator. The current world climate in the wake of the establishment of the International Criminal Court may partly explain Mugabe's unwillingness to leave power, for fear that he could be prosecuted for human rights abuses in an international court.

Would the promise of immunity and perhaps exile to a friendly country be enough to make him to reconsider? Given that former Liberian president Charles Taylor is currently awaiting trial by the Special Court for Sierra Leone, after exile host Nigeria released him into the custody of the current democratically-elected Liberian government, it may be difficult to broker a deal that Mugabe would find palatable.

But for the sake of ordinary Zimbabweans, teetering on the thin edge of outright catastrophe, the African Union and other players might do well to start looking for a divorce lawyer skilful enough to negotiate the transition.

Ayesha Kajee is Programme Head for Democracy and Political Party Systems in Africa at the South African Institute of International Affairs.