

Time for Concerted International Action on Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Zimbabwe has entered a political and economic crisis that could worsen precipitously and destabilize the surrounding region. Pressures for democratic change and economic reform are steep—indeed growing—as Zimbabwe heads, with considerable uncertainty, toward national elections in the first quarter of 2002. Yet the government of President Robert Mugabe and his cronies within the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party resist genuine reform, determined instead to use violent coercion to hold onto power and privilege. Challenging the 77-year-old Mugabe's hold on power are a range of mobilized organizations, most notably the opposition political party the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), along with the Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions, and civic organizations associated with the National Constitutional Assembly and other nongovernmental networks.

Whether the opposition's remarkably disciplined adherence to nonviolence can hold under mounting violence is an open question. Equally unclear are the evolving calculations of the commanding officers and rank-and-file of the military, the police, and the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), whose ultimate political loyalties could prove decisive to the next phase of Zimbabwe's future. More certain is that Zimbabwe's margin for economic maneuver has evaporated, compounding national tensions. Agricultural shortfalls that could total 600,000 metric tons by early 2002 raise the specter of mass hunger and internal dislocation and significantly increase Zimbabwe's dependence on external largesse. (Harare will require upward of \$270

million in humanitarian relief.) By virtually every macroeconomic indicator, the national economy is at its worst point ever, and could worsen before it improves. And on top of these trends, Zimbabwe's prevalence rate for HIV in adults—25 percent—is the second highest in the world, next to Botswana.

U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell's public rebuke of Mugabe, delivered while in South Africa in May, signaled heightened interest within the Bush administration in the Zimbabwean crisis, and was preceded and followed by an active internal review of policy options. The Bush administration has yet to outline publicly what additional policy measures it will pursue.

The United States and the broader international community should make every effort to raise the odds that Zimbabwe's crisis can be resolved peacefully through free and fair elections. At the same time, however, realism is needed: Mugabe is highly unlikely to concede power through a relatively free and fair electoral process, and highly likely to resort to ever-higher levels of violence. The signs are starkly manifest: already there have been violent episodes in the run-up to the elections in early 2002, stoked by the government's continued sanctioning of brutal intimidation of the political opposition, judiciary, media, and commercial farming and other business entities. Although a concerted international campaign is warranted to turn Mugabe off this course and onto a path that bring free and fair elections, one needs to admit that there is a high probability that effort may fail.

Hence a top priority of U.S. policy should be to prepare contingencies for alternative scenarios, namely, a negotiated transfer of power, or, far more uncertain and potentially dangerous, a chaotic and violent transition impelled by mass popular uprising, a government-declared state of emergency, or a military coup. Until now, U.S. policy has not systematically countenanced these possibilities. Now, rather than later, is the time to prepare for these nonelectoral outcomes. Where warranted, the administration should consciously build on

the strategy pursued during 2000–2001 in Serbia that targeted sanctions against Milosevic, combined with innovative support to the opposition, sustained public diplomacy, and concerted multilateral action.

Related priorities of U.S. policy should include:

- Through a stream of high-level statements, testimony, travel, and expanded radio transmissions by Voice of Africa, Washington should consistently keep Zimbabwe in the international spotlight while seeking to shape Zimbabwe's internal media environment.
- The U.S. administration should initiate dialogue now with the U.S. Congress to strengthen and forge consensus on the Zimbabwe Democracy Act (which was approved by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and lays out a package of inducements and punitive measures, including the threat of sanctions upon Mugabe and his associates). The administration should initiate discussions now with Congress to devise more precise conditionalities and enhanced inducements and pressures, rather than hastily negotiate these points later, should circumstances in Zimbabwe suddenly deteriorate.
- Beginning in September and October, Washington should intensify its engagement with South Africa, Britain, the European Union, and the Commonwealth of Nations, with the aim of creating a common front to pressure Mugabe to pull back from progressively more violent tyranny, loosen controls over external technical assistance in support of electoral administration and independent monitoring, and return to the rule of law in implementing land reform. The United States should coordinate the timing and scope of bilateral measures with those of the EU and the Commonwealth of Nations to ensure maximum impact and effectiveness. In multilateral efforts, the United States should push for an international package of credible carrots and sticks that includes the explicit threat of a travel ban and asset freeze, imposed on Mugabe and his inner circle and ratified by the UN Security Council, if evidence is not significant within a fixed period (e.g., 60–90 days) that Mugabe has desisted from violently destabilizing this next electoral phase and has begun to restore the rule of law.
- Washington needs to make a special effort to persuade South Africa to act with greater conviction

and determination to rein in Mugabe. Thus far, commitments have been largely rhetorical, yet the threatened costs to South Africa and the surrounding neighborhood should Zimbabwe's crisis deepen are enormous.

- Washington should aggressively enlarge its planning for a humanitarian emergency in Zimbabwe, take the lead in establishing a dynamic international humanitarian coordinating mechanism in Harare, and press for maximum delivery of assistance through nongovernmental bodies.
- Washington should strengthen its grasp of the perceptions and intentions of the military, the police, and the CIO and make the case directly to them for a democratic, nonviolent, and orderly transition.
- Washington should aggressively enlarge contact with reformists, within government and without, and significantly expand the operation of USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives and related grantmaking to independent democracy and governance organizations.

The Present Crisis

Many observers had high hopes for Zimbabwe after it achieved independence in 1980 following a brutal civil war against white rule and embarked on a national policy of racial conciliation, extension of education and health services to its citizenry, and the promotion of economic growth. The country of 11 million people has considerable agricultural potential and has been a significant exporter of tobacco and maize as well as gold and other minerals. The tourist industry has brought in large amounts of foreign exchange, bolstered by Victoria Falls and well-managed game parks. Zimbabwe has a tradition of independent courts, professional civil servants, a professional and entrepreneurial class that grew steadily in the 1980s and 1990s, and an educational and health system that for many years was a model for other countries in Africa.

Mugabe's reign, however, steadily degenerated in the 1990s into corruption, authoritarianism, and violent patrimonial rule. Following the government's defeat in the February 2000 referendum on a new constitution and the launch of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) to challenge its rule, the ruling party used violence and intimidation to retain power in the June 2000 parliamentary elections. So-called "war veterans,"

working closely with ZANU-PF and the police, seized white-owned farms, and engaged in widespread attacks against opposition strongholds. Intense political violence in the 90 days preceding the June 24–25 elections resulted in at least 38 and possibly as many as 80 fatalities. Despite violence, intimidation, and fraud, however, the MDC won nearly 50 percent of votes cast, according to official figures, and took 57 of the 120 elected seats (1 seat was won by another small party, 30 seats are appointed, and the MDC has challenged the results of 39 seats in court).

Today, the ruling party and state security agencies are tightening controls further in the run-up to the presidential elections scheduled for April 2002. New limits on the media, escalating attacks on opposition leaders and supporters, and prohibitions against international support for democratization confirm widespread suspicions that the Mugabe regime is prepared to use coercion and intimidation to retain its hold on power, with reckless disregard of the rule of law. War veterans moved from seizing white-owned farms in 2000 to attacking nongovernmental organizations, threatening independent judges, journalists, and foreign diplomats, and occupying businesses and local government offices in 2001. President Mugabe has readily resorted to blatant tyranny and abuse of power as means of survival, embracing these tactics as part of a broader strategy of fomenting anarchy.

Indications are that the military and police are becoming increasingly politicized as the leadership is purged of professionals and stacked with Mugabe loyalists. The deaths of several prominent leaders, including Minister of Defense Moven Mahachi and Minister of Gender and Employment Creation Border Gezi, in car crashes that many Zimbabweans regard as nonaccidental, have recently shaken the ZANU-PF. Chenjerai “Hitler” Hunzi, the leader of the war veterans, died in June 2001. The party’s loss of the February 2000 referendum, loss of urban constituencies in the June 2000 parliamentary elections, and, most recently, the loss of the municipal election in Masvingo in May 2001 have rattled the leadership and aggravated an existing atmosphere of paranoia and conspiracy.

The opposition MDC represents one of the most dynamic and effective democratic movements in Africa today. It is a broad-based party, formed out of the trade union and civil society movement that organized the campaign against the referendum in 2000. It has demonstrated its ability to win votes across ethnic lines in urban areas and

has a strong regional base in the Ndebele-inhabited Matabeleland region, where memories persist of government violence that left an estimated 7,000 to 20,000 Ndebele civilians dead in the 1980s. Under the leadership of former trade union leader Morgan Tsvangirai, the MDC has consistently espoused the centrality of a return to the rule of law. Its economic policies are neoliberal, with calls for a value added tax to balance the budget, reform of parastatals, cooperation with international financial institutions, and land reform based on consultations and private property rights. The MDC, along with civil society groups, has demonstrated remarkable restraint and internal discipline in the face of persistent violence and coercion and has assiduously avoided actions that might provide a pretext for a state of emergency. Most observers believe that the MDC would handily win a fair election, a conclusion supported by recent public opinion surveys.

The political crisis has both contributed to and been exacerbated by Zimbabwe’s dramatic economic decline. Zimbabwe’s intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo alone triggered a hemorrhage of government funds and crippling budget deficits while favored military officials have enriched themselves through procurement contracts and the stripping of assets within Congo. The Economist Intelligence Unit forecasts gross domestic product to fall 5.6 percent and inflation to reach 56 percent in 2001. Foreign exchange has disappeared, tourists have stayed home, and investors have fled. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has hit Zimbabwe particularly hard, with nearly one-quarter of adults estimated to be HIV positive despite major investments by international donors and private relief organizations. Disruption of the agricultural sector has led to major shortages of wheat and maize, staple foods of most Zimbabweans. Cereal production for the current marketing cycle is forecast at about 1.82 million tons, 24 percent down from last year, and observers predict that the country will require significant international food relief—as much as 600,000 tons—by fall 2001. Fuel prices increased by 70 percent in June, leading the trade unions to organize a two-day general strike in early July that halted most urban economic activity and resulted in a number of clashes.

Scenarios

Mugabe’s regime appears headed for a hard crash. Tensions in the lead up to elections and in the context of an economic and food emergency could easily provide the spark that generates an even more debilitating crisis. Three possible scenarios emerge.

Elections: The first and clearly most desirable scenario would be if relatively free and fair elections transpire, with violence and intimidation kept to a minimum. Most observers believe that although Mugabe does retain some bases of support in the Shona rural heartland, within ZANU-PF, and, to some degree, among the military and police forces and the CIO, in such circumstances, Tsvangirai would emerge the victor. It is unlikely, however, that Mugabe will allow himself to be voted out of office, and more probable that he would cancel the elections altogether, nullify the results or otherwise sabotage the process if he is convinced the process has a fair chance of empowering Tsvangirai.

Negotiated transfer: A second possible scenario is a negotiated transfer of power, possibly built around a government of national unity that includes elements of the MDC and reformist elements within ZANU-PF. Such an arrangement would likely require an amnesty for those implicated in the violence and corruption of the ruling regime, a safe exit for Mugabe himself, and perhaps active external facilitation. Some observers suggest that ZANU-PF has been so compromised and purged of moderates that a coalition with opposition leaders may be impossible. Others contend that reformist elements within the ruling party do exist but have been cowed by Mugabe's intimidation tactics.

Forced change: A third scenario of forced change prior to or during the elections is a very real possibility. Should Mugabe ban political parties, declare a state of emergency, or unleash paramilitary loyalists on the Zimbabwean people, there may be mass action and civil unrest as the opposition and civil society resist. Whether such demonstrations will result in a Belgrade- or Manila-style "people's power" transition or widespread violence and chaos is very difficult to gauge, and will depend to a significant degree on the calculations and evolving allegiances of the Zimbabwean armed forces. A military coup or military acquiescence to a massive popular uprising are not out of the question and will depend to some degree on Mugabe's adroitness in keeping both rank and file and senior military officials paid and satisfied. Zimbabwe's maneuvers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the timing and conditions of troop withdrawal and demobilization may also be important factors that shape outcomes.

International Policy

International leaders, with the exception of former colonial power Great Britain, have been slow to focus on

Zimbabwe's growing crisis, and until recently the southern African region has been in denial of the threat. In the past few months, international concern has coalesced, and external powers are converging on a set of common premises and actions. The United Kingdom's criticisms are now being echoed in larger multilateral settings, including the European Union and the Commonwealth of Nations. The EU in late June 2001 indicated its intention to closely monitor developments in Zimbabwe during a two-month period and to take appropriate measures if the government failed to make substantial progress in restoring the rule of law, ending political violence, and publicly committing itself to holding free and fair presidential elections. The EU will likely determine what those measures will be at an upcoming EU general council meeting in early October. Also in June, the Commonwealth of Nations, at Nigeria's proposition, agreed to send a special ministerial delegation to Zimbabwe, in preparation for the October Commonwealth Head of Government meeting in Brisbane, to address broad governance concerns and open dialogue to resolve differences on the land redistribution strategies. Should Mugabe's regime persist in fomenting violence and lawlessness, the Brisbane conference may consider suspending Zimbabwe's membership in the Commonwealth of Nations. At recent points, South African president Thabo Mbeki and the rest of the South African government have appeared to take a more forceful approach, though there is still little evidence of a concerted, determined South African effort to rein in Mugabe. Zimbabwe's other neighbors and key African leaders such as Nigeria's President Olugbeson Obasanjo are increasingly engaged.

Colin Powell's call for democratization and the rule of law in Zimbabwe during his May 2001 trip to the region placed the issue on the front burner of U.S. policy toward Africa. Powell observed that Mugabe "seems determined to remain in power" but that "it is for the citizens of Zimbabwe to choose their leader in a free and fair election, and they should be given one." Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Walter Kansteiner recently summarized U.S. policy in June: "Our message to President Mugabe and his government must be consistent and clear: [although] the United States desires open and friendly relations with Zimbabwe, we cannot have normal relations until the violence and intimidation are ended and the rule of law is restored." The U.S. Congress has taken up the Zimbabwe issue, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has approved the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act,

which calls for continued suspension of bilateral assistance and debt forgiveness until the rule of law and adherence to other international norms are restored. The Bush administration should not delay initiating discussion with Congress on Zimbabwe and ironing out any points of difference it might have on the Zimbabwe Act, for example inserting more precise language on conditionality, and enhancing inducements and pressure for reform. When Congress moves to enact the bill, last minute debates and fine-tuning on the bill that might delay its implementation may also diminish its impact and effectiveness.

The international community must speak with one voice and condemn the violence and lawlessness that is at the heart of Zimbabwe's crisis. As a priority, external actors should do their utmost to encourage and facilitate the transition of power through free and fair elections. First, the United States and others should openly challenge Zimbabwe's legislative ban on external assistance to political parties, a law which may extend to barring nonpartisan technical assistance to activities such as voter education or verifying the flawed voters rolls. The international community should push the Zimbabwean government to accept election monitors 90 days prior to the election, should offer support to Zimbabwe's newly established Electoral Commission and independent Zimbabwean election monitors, and assist efforts to register and enfranchise the nearly 1.5 million Zimbabweans who live outside of Zimbabwe, mostly in South Africa. The U.S. administration should follow up Powell's public rebuke of Mugabe in May 2001 with repeated calls for the government of Zimbabwe to respect the rule of law, rein in war veterans bent on terror and anarchy, and open political space by allowing freedom of movement and access to the state-controlled media by all parties. The administration should bolster its public exhortations with the credible threat that Washington will lead in the United Nations and bilaterally impose on Mugabe and his inner circle a travel ban and a freeze on overseas assets unless substantial progress is seen in a fixed period (e.g., 60–90 days). It should also lay out other stark actions that it will undertake should circumstances worsen: should elections be cancelled or nullified; should Mugabe declare a state of emergency, ban political parties, or further curtail political space.

The United States should create a donor coordination mechanism, such as the Economic Governance Group and the Political and Constitutional Forum established by the international community in Kenya, to harmonize conditionality requirements and curtail the regime's

ability to play donors off of each other. In particular, large-scale food relief in response to the imminent shortfall of staples must be managed carefully to avoid donated food from becoming additional patronage used to shore up the failing regime and to support nongovernmental organizations in the countryside.

External funds to combat HIV/AIDS will likewise need to be insulated from political manipulation. As one of Africa's most acutely affected countries, Zimbabwe will serve, for better or worse, as a critical test case for international efforts to combat HIV/AIDS. U.S. organizations, including the Rockefeller Foundation and Stanford University, have been active in Harare since the mid-1980s and have invested considerable resources in fighting the disease. Zimbabwe and the southern African region will be under intense scrutiny in coming years, and should AIDS funding be squandered or used for venal political ends, the risk of donor disengagement and cynicism, with dire implications for the rest of Africa's HIV-positive population of 26 million, is very real. The United States should also work with the international community to encourage Zimbabwe's adherence to the Lusaka cease-fire agreement and the UN-led strategy of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Resettlement.

Should the Zimbabwean government agree to a negotiated transitional power-sharing arrangement, through a coalition government with amnesty for Mugabe and his associates, the United States and the international community should concur and extend offers of facilitation, while continuing to push for open elections, expanded political space, and democratic consolidation. Such an arrangement may defuse some of the most immediate and acute political tensions and make it easier to establish the conditions and technical assistance necessary for democratic change through elections.

Should there be a massive popular uprising, as occurred in Cote d'Ivoire in October 2000, the international community must remain firm in its support for the rule of law and the transfer of power through peaceful and democratic means. In every instance, the United States should make it clear that it is not interested in parties or personalities, but in democratic processes that are grounded in law—law that is crafted by and for the Zimbabwean people and protected by an independent judiciary.

Conclusion

Tensions within Zimbabwe are nearing the breaking point. Agreement is nearly universal that responsibility for Zimbabwe's dismal situation rests at Mugabe's door—and that unless he steps down or is removed from power, the country will continue to stagger toward collapse. The question becomes whether Mugabe's *fin de regime* is marked by violence, displacement, and unmet humanitarian needs or whether he and his inner circle at some point come to terms with the reality of their situation. Now is the time for the international community to forge a common message that clearly condemns violence and demands a return to the rule of law and a democratically elected government. The next months will be pivotal for Zimbabwe, and the risks of wider violence and instability compel urgent action. Mugabe's departure will not guarantee a quick reversal, but it will certainly be a necessary first step toward realizing the country's tremendous potential. Long-term prospects for Zimbabwe still give reason for hope—if Zimbabwe is able to move peaceably beyond Mugabe and avoid a hard crash.

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