

ZIMBABWE

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Ideas of March

The contested election result in Kenya and its violent aftermath are focussing new attention on voting in Zimbabwe, scheduled for the end of March. Polling takes place against a backdrop of a long-running and worsening economic crisis, political uncertainty and the likelihood of increasing political and criminal violence.

tHE MOST CONTENTIOUS QUESTIONS REVOLVE around the elections themselves; no one is expecting a free and fair process. Six months ago, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was crushed by state security and marginalised by South Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union. The opposition has been weakened further by in-fighting, widespread scepticism about Morgan Tsvangirai's leadership skills and the lack of a clear strategy for achieving power.

On the other hand, the ruling ZANU-PF has also been wracked by factionalism, and the succession issue over President Robert Mugabe looms large. Adding to the tumult is the decision by former minister, and ex-SADC Secretary-General, Dr Simba Makoni, to stand against him.

Although there is little doubt that the odds are already stacked against opposition and independent candidates, Zimbabweans are increasingly taking these elections very seriously indeed.

THE SURVIVALISTS' TOOLBOX

ZANU-PF is often portrayed as a thuggish clique which relies on violence to remain in power. Although violence is certainly one of the state's most effective tools, the party has



evolved a sophisticated strategy of survivalist power politics.

The philosophy behind it is similar to South Africa's apartheid era 'total strategy', in which the state's survival depended on producing a comprehensive approach to counter a 'total onslaught', both internal and external, aimed at regime change. Zanu-PF has developed an all-embracing post-2000 strategy based on recapturing and consolidating support in the rural heartlands, neglected in the 1990s.

Land redistribution, which involved the seizure without compensation of white-owned farms, played a vital role in re-establishing the state's rural popularity. Many saw it as payback for colonial era injustices inflicted on Zimbabweans.

The ideological component of the total strategy is based on popularising the belief that the country has undergone a genuine revolution since 2000, and that the state and its leader are empowering citizens in an anti-colonial, counterknowledge project.

The third part of the total strategy is the state alliance with the security sector and the militarisation of politics and the economy to safeguard the party's survival. This has contributed to the morphing into one of the state, the party and government. Arguably the most powerful component has been the re-emergence of Mugabe as a cultural and ideological icon of pan-Africanism. The opposition has been 'formalised' by the state, and has had to move within the confines of a state-controlled 'game'.

A NEW POLITICS?

Many believe that the lack of a level playing field will make the elections symbolic at best, legitimising the authoritarian state and that the real focus should be the country's post-electoral future. However, there is a growing consensus that the elections matter. These are the first harmonised polls for municipalities, parliament and president and the only real chance for the state, the opposition, and independent candidates to engage in the national political process.

The elections will be as interesting for the light they shed on intra-party politics, as for inter-party contests. Although Mugabe remains at the helm of his squabbling party, there are powerful undercurrents which hint at a new politics.

There is a great deal of controversy over candidates. The party tradition is for them to be chosen in internal party primaries; however, the older generation is keen to nominate by consensus, because it fears losing candidacies to younger contenders.

Mugabe has made it clear that only those who receive party backing and win in their designated constituencies will be given cabinet posts. This sets in motion a generational struggle between those who fought the liberation war against the white minority regime of Ian Smith during the 1960s and 1970s who are currently in charge, and the post 2000 generation, keen to attain power. There have already been clashes between supporters of the rival aspirants, and in November Mugabe took the unusual step of making an appeal for non-violence.

KING MAKERS

The groups jostling for power in ZANU-PF are diverse. They include political and military grandees from the liberation era as well as leaders of the hugely influential ZANU-PF Women's League, which, together with the security sector, have emerged as kingmakers. There is also a new generation of technocrats, such as Makoni. The technocrats invariably lack party grass roots support, but in a country where education is taken very seriously, their qualifications can be politically useful.

There are also urban and rural businesspeople, who can be influential. The chiefs are often seen as pawns of the party, but at election time, they are often surprisingly powerful. And then there are war veterans groups including genuine ex-combatants and post-independence baby-boomers, who claim a military heritage they are not entitled to.

The various groups are battling for power in the elections; but they are really seeking to position themselves for the post-electoral cabinet; and beyond that, for a role in the post-Mugabe era when the new generation will be significant nationally and internationally.

AVOIDING OBLIVION

The opposition MDC has also been beset by internal power struggles. Its key problem has been the failure to find a strategy for attaining power, with many critics

contending that while it is clear what it stands against – ZANU-PF – it is less clear what it stands for. There have also been divisions within the MDC over whether or not to contest the election, given that it is already heavily weighted in the state's favour.

Many civil society groups formerly affiliated to the MDC insist that the process is a sham and will legitimise the state. But the opposition faces a simple choice: contest the polls or face oblivion, boycotting is not a credible option. The two rival MDC groups, led by Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara, will now compete separately.

A THIRD FORCE

There has been much talk of a 'Third Force' and the emergence of a new party. Makoni has recently confirmed his independent candidacy for the presidency, in direct competition with Mugabe. If he is to attract voters, Makoni will need a clear message of economic change and clarity on political change. He will also have to clarify whether he is trying to create a postmodern, 'new' ZANU-PF, or whether he is in fact building an opposition party.

Hard core rural ZANU-PF voters will not switch to Makoni, but he could pick up enough support in the cities and some rural areas, to win seats. To do this he needs to convince voters that he is not simply a Trojan horse for ZANU-PF.

His candidacy is significant, but he is unlikely to unseat Mugabe. If anything, he is more of a threat to Tsvangirai who will also be trawling for urban votes. In the long-term Makoni may emerge as a major power-broker; he will certainly be a factor in the post-Mugabe succession struggle.

There has been talk of rogue elements in the security sector plotting to remove Mugabe by force, and formalising military rule. Although there is no doubt that there is military disaffection, it is vague and amorphous. Mugabe still retains the allegiance of the most powerful groups, and in the immediate future, a coup is unlikely.

There is no tradition of praetorianism and military takeovers, and that is unlikely to change. The middle and top ranks of the Defence Forces and the Central Intelligence Organisation owe their privileges directly to the President and his party, and this symbiotic relationship will continue. It is in the interests of the security sector to keep Mugabe in office and delay succession issues as long as possible. For those who benefit from and are plugged in to the political power networks, Mugabe represents stability; it is the post-Mugabe era which has the potential for chaos.

There is also the fourth force of civil society groups and trade unions, which are increasingly differentiating themselves from the opposition and staking their claim as the country's conscience. This broad coalition, which includes organisations such as the Crisis in Zimbabwe coalition, and Lawyers for Human Rights, is often seen as including irrelevant urban, middle-class groups – but it will certainly have an impact on the urban vote.



FINDING FLAWS

The electoral landscape has been one of the greatest irritants in the South African brokered talks between government and the opposition, over the past few months. Pre-electoral concerns have included: the demarcation of constituencies; the voters roll and the composition of the Electoral Supervisory Commission. The opposition wants an independent Commission, rather than one which is state appointed and biased.

In addition, rural provinces will have 143 constituencies, while the urban areas – which are largely hostile to the state – have 67. Also at issue is whether the opposition will be allowed to campaign in rural areas, which are the ruling party's heartland.

The opposition had been agitating for these electoral and other constitutional issues to be addressed prior to the election, and for voting to be postponed until mid-year. Mugabe needs polling as soon as possible, to avoid a protracted stalemate and to enhance his 'democratic' credentials.

There are also concerns that the process itself will be seriously flawed. There has been a long tradition of multiple votes by state supporters, particularly in rural areas; and ghost voting, with many individuals who are long deceased, somehow appearing on the voters' roll.

Why then is the opposition contesting an election which many feel it is doomed to lose? The answer is that it has no choice; failure to contest would destroy it as a political voice. In addition, in the face of political realities, the MDC has been forced to amend its regime-change, 'Mugabe must go' mantra. The polls give the opposition the hope, however tenuous, of political power-sharing with ZANU-PF.

It may also attempt a Kenya strategy. If it can muster enough support to have a closely contested vote, then any state irregularities could actually benefit the MDC, by stoking popular discontent and international support.

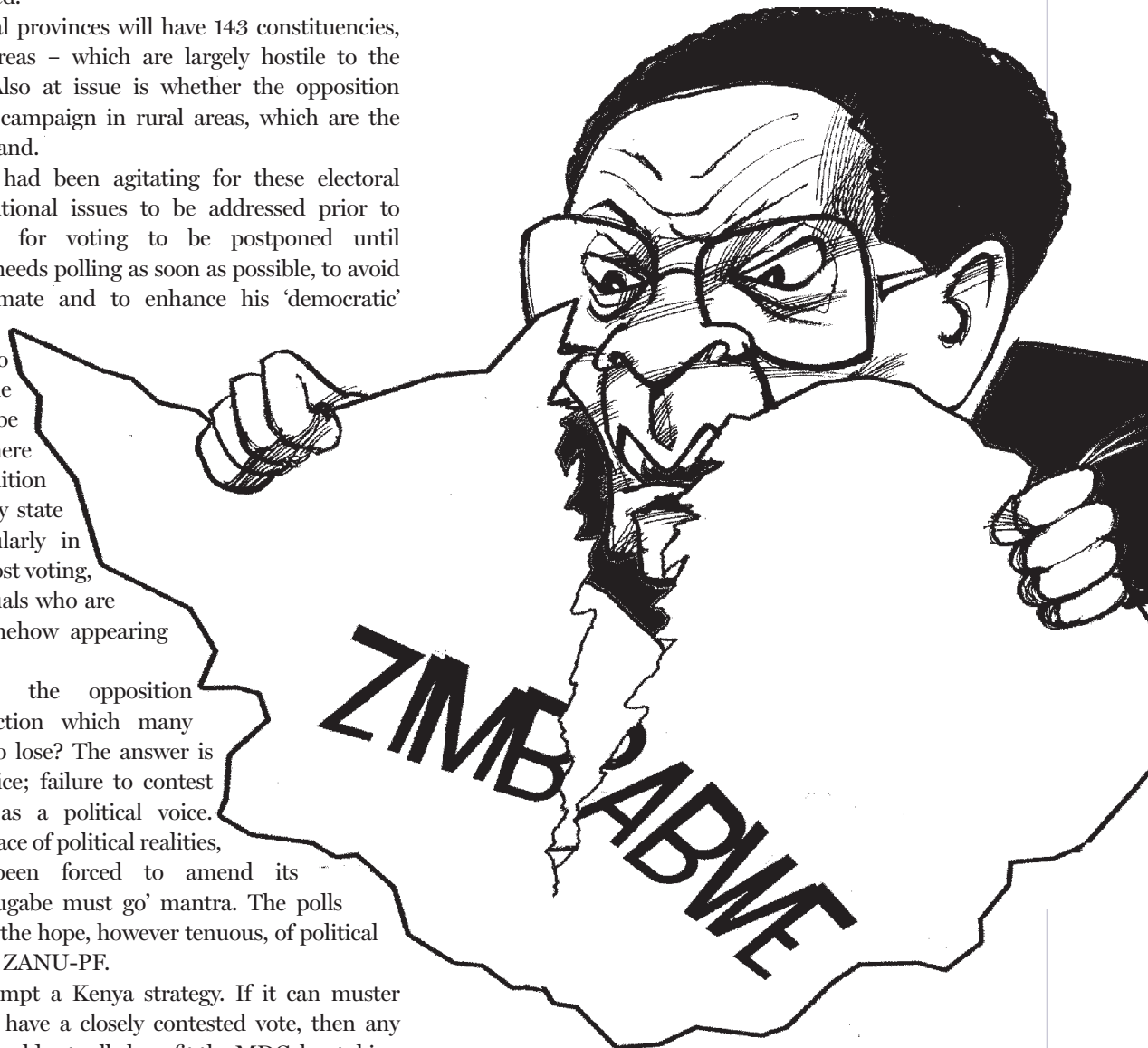
A blatantly rigged election could backfire against the state in the long term. So the opposition strategy is not necessarily based on winning, but on ensuring a heroic and contentious defeat which will embarrass the state and gain support.

The opposition thus has to ensure a good turnout in urban areas, while the state has to do the same in the countryside. Violence remains a major concern, as does the question of accreditation for foreigners to observe the process.

Zimbabwe's problems will not cease after the election – indeed it is likely that there will be a downturn as the nation braces for the acrimonious aftermath. The economy will continue to totter, and there will be little significant

new investment. Economic problems will be compounded by the new regional econopolitik. Power and fuel shortages across the region mean the protective umbrella of economic regional solidarity and the ideological membrane of 'patriotic blackness' may fray.

It is also unlikely that the region will be exempt from the current global recession. This will impact most severely on



Zimbabwe, and worsen the crisis. The humanitarian emergency is also affecting the region, and has led to increasing xenophobia in South Africa.

Zimbabwe's politics will also be de-stabilising; the Mugabe succession issue; internal factionalism within the ruling party, and between the ruling party and the opposition, will continue unabated. It is likely that the cruel summer of late last year, will turn into a brutal winter of discontent this year. The ruling party may be forced to make concessions and work out a limited power-sharing deal, not because of political pressures, but because this will be the only way to revive the economy.

