

# **The pro-democracy movement in Zimbabwe (1998 – present)**

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**Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance  
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## **Conflict Summary:**

The nonviolent struggle for democracy in Zimbabwe became more pronounced from the late 1990s to the present. The struggle is led by opposition parties and civil society against the rule of ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front) under President Robert Mugabe, who has been the sole ruler since the country attained independence from British colonial rule.

## **Political History:**

Zimbabwe gained independence from colonialism on April 18, 1980 after a bloody civil war with the white minority Rhodesian government. Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party formed the new government. The initial hope created by independence was dampened by unrest in Midlands and Matebeland provinces in the 1982-1985 caused by political differences between Mugabe's ZANU-PF party and veteran nationalist Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union) party. Mugabe deployed his North Korean-trained 5th Brigade to deal with followers of ZAPU, the then-largest opposition. Known as Gukurahundi, the operation left about 20,000 civilians dead<sup>1</sup>, mostly of Ndebele ethnicity that largely supported Nkomo.

Peace only came in 1987 when the two adversaries signed the Unity Accord that led to a "unity government." But in reality ZAPU was wholly swallowed by ZANU-PF and it became extinct, creating a de facto one-party state.

By the late 1990s, many Zimbabweans were growing weary of President Mugabe's rule as the economy failed due to mismanagement, corruption and participation in an expensive war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Power and fuel shortages surfaced while inflation, unemployment and HIV/Aids infections soared. Education, health and social services decayed as the quality of life plummeted.

There was no viable opposition party and Mugabe showed no desire to leave power or reform.

## **Strategic Actions:**

### *Stayaways*

The first major nonviolent action was initiated by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU)—a national labour federation. Originally established by the government, the federation had subsequently grown more independent and critical of government policies.

In mid-November 1998, ZCTU called for a national boycott to pressure the government to reverse its 67 percent price hike on gas, which had caused massive rises in prices of other goods and services. Known as "mass stayaways," workers and the general population were asked to

simply stay home. People complied and most towns grounded to a halt as factories, offices, and schools failed to open and commuter buses parked. The government lost millions in revenue. The union's then-secretary-general, Morgan Tsvangirai, declared it a success.

The ZCTU stayaways marked increasing discontent among different sectors of the Zimbabwean population. Hitherto, such confrontational protests and acts of noncooperation had been confined to university students. The stayaways engaged a variety of people and showed people's disgruntlement without unnecessarily exposing them to confrontations with armed police and soldiers who were heavily deployed across the country.

More stayaways were conducted, but they lost potency as the economic meltdown worsened and people became more engrossed with daily struggles for basic survival like selling wares and searching for food.

### *Referendum*

In 2000, people power was once again displayed during a referendum for a new constitution.

The National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) was formed in 1997. A grouping of civic organizations representing churches, labor, students, women, human rights, and other organizations sought to create a new "people-driven" constitution. ZCTU was also a member and future prime minister and head of the opposition to ZANU-PF Morgan Tsvangirai was ZCTU's chairman. The new people-driven constitution was expected to define issues such as presidential terms, land reform, human rights and other issues. It was envisaged to replace the 1979 Lancaster House Agreement that Zimbabwe had adopted soon after independence and which had been subsequently amended numerous times to benefit the ZANU-PF government.

Seeing potential for populism, the government immediately hijacked the NCA idea, formed a Constitutional Commission and rolled out a massive nationwide campaign complimented by a heavy media blitz to rally the population around its agenda for constitutional reform. After countrywide consultations, the Constitutional Commission produced a draft document that expanded Mugabe's executive powers and endorsed ZANU-PF's plans to seize white-owned commercial farms—issues that were never demanded by the people. The NCA immediately rejected the draft constitution and mobilized the population to vote "No" while the well-resourced Constitutional Commission campaigned for "Yes".

In February 2000 the referendum vote was held, with 54.7 percent voting "No" and 45.3 voting "Yes."<sup>2</sup> For the first time in its long history, ZANU-PF was defeated in a national election, shattering its myth of invincibility. The campaign was peaceful and the voting process smooth.

The plebiscite strengthened people's confidence in the electoral process, which had previously been characterized by apathy.

However, the government also realized that it could not win any free and fair elections. Henceforth, it resorted to violence and manipulation of electoral processes.

The government abandoned the constitution issue and capitalized on the emotive land question which it had neglected for two decades. About 4,500 whites owned 90 percent of all prime land in Zimbabwe and ZANU-PF said it would correct that colonial legacy. Mugabe said "Our party must continue to strike fear in the heart of the white man, our real enemy."<sup>3</sup> Veterans of the liberation war and youth militias were unleashed onto commercial farms. Chaotic and violent, the invasions caused agricultural production to plummet, leaving millions depending on international food aid and imports up to the present day.

The government proceeded to create an intricate infrastructure of violence and intimidation involving war veterans, youth militias (known locally as "Green Bombers"), police, army and intelligence personnel to coerce people into voting for ZANU-PF.

The judiciary was purged of independent judges while several draconian legislative acts were introduced. For instance, the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) gave police sweeping powers to prevent any gatherings or demonstrations by opposition and civic groups. The Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) was used to banish foreign journalists, arrest local independent journalists and close three private newspapers, including The Daily News whose readership had surpassed the state-controlled daily, The Herald. With the closing of independent media outlets and intimidation of journalists, the opposition lost valuable space to enunciate their policies and get coverage of their activities while the general public was left to feed on propaganda from state media monopolies in television, radio, and print media.

Opposition activities were largely circulated through word of mouth. In rural areas unemployed school leavers and teachers formed the bulk of pro-democracy supporters and distributed red cards, the emblem of the Movement for Democratic Change (outlined below).

### *Elections*

In September 1999, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) political party was formed under the leadership of Morgan Tsvangirai. It was socially democratic and diverse, drawing its membership from ZCTU, NCA, business, professionals, academics, students, whites and unemployed youths. MDC was the first opposition party to pose a real challenge to ZANU-PF.

In the March 2000 parliamentary elections, ZANU-PF narrowly defeated the new MDC by winning 63 seats to the MDC's 57 out of the total 120 constituencies.

Most of the MDC's votes came from urban areas, including Harare and Matebeleland provinces. Voter turnout was huge despite ZANU-PF's gerrymandering, manipulations and violence. The government introduced skewed electoral laws, stifled independent voter education and used militias and security forces to harass opposition activists. There were also allegations of the government using food aid as a political tool.

In the March 2002 presidential elections, the official tally stated that Morgan Tsvangirai garnered 42 percent while incumbent president Robert Mugabe won by 56 percent and the remainder split amongst three other candidates. The elections were marred by violence by ZANU-PF supporters against opposition supporters and allegations of vote rigging. Tsvangirai said the election was "stolen."

African countries overlooked Tsvangirai's protests and endorsed Mugabe's victory but Western countries did not. They froze assets, imposed travel and trade bans—"targeted sanctions"—on Mugabe and his officials.

In March 2005, the MDC split internally over differences on whether to participate in House of Assembly elections. Morgan Tsvangirai boycotted the elections, saying the electoral framework was skewed to achieve predetermined victory for ZANU-PF but some of his top officials participated nonetheless organized as members of the MDC led by Arthur Mutambara. ZANU-PF won 78 seats, MDC 41, and independent candidate Jonathan Moyo 1.<sup>4</sup> To this day the two factions of the MDC have not united.

In May 2005, the government embarked on Operation Murambatsvina and destroyed urban shelters and informal business in sprawling poor suburbs throughout the country. Murambatsvina left millions homeless and without sources of livelihood and drew world condemnation even by the UN.<sup>5</sup> Critics alleged the exercise was meant to depopulate urban areas, known to be opposition strongholds, to preempt mass uprisings.

In March 2008 history was made. The MDC won the majority seats in parliament, displacing ZANU-PF for the first time. The MDC also claimed that Tsvangirai had won the Presidential election by 50.2 percent. The government-appointed Zimbabwe Election Commission withheld the official results for several months, as it became apparent Mugabe had lost the election. It later announced that Tsvangirai had won by 47.9% versus Mugabe's 43.2% and therefore a run-off was needed as none had polled more than 50% as required by law. The government then proceeded to organize extreme violence against the MDC organization and party members, which led Tsvangirai to withdraw. Mugabe was then declared the sole winner. There was an

international outcry and Mugabe lost any shred of credibility even amongst his African sympathizers.

This election exposed Tsvangirai's lack of contingency plans to force Mugabe to accept defeat. There was no infrastructure in place to mobilize for a mass action to demand Mugabe's departure and litigation was a dead-end since the judiciary was stacked with Mugabe's appointees.

The election also proved that despite an unprecedented economic meltdown, Mugabe's core pillars of support (the army and the police) were still intact and Tsvangirai had not earned their cooperation. It also revealed that the real decision-makers in the government were not Mugabe and his advisers but the security chiefs sitting as the Joint Operation Command, an organ of top intelligence, military, police and prisons officials.

Before 2002, some of these officials declared they would "not accept, let alone support or salute"<sup>6</sup> anyone without liberation war credentials, a clear reference to Tsvangirai. Towards the 2008 presidential elections, the head of the Joint Operation Command, General Constantine Chiwenga, again said "We will not support anyone other than President Mugabe who has sacrificed a lot for the country."<sup>7</sup> Mugabe himself threatened war saying, "We shed a lot of blood for this country. We are not going to give up our country for a mere X on a ballot. How can a ballpoint pen fight with a gun?"<sup>8</sup>

### *Demonstrations*

Civil society has continued to put pressure on the regime. Although the ZCTU lost most of its active constituency to unemployment (which was estimated at more than 85%), it still remains very active and relevant in mobilizing its regional and international partners to exert pressure on Mugabe.

After defeating the ZANU-PF Constitutional Commission in the February 2000 plebiscite, the NCA continued to conduct frequent countrywide street protests not only for a new constitution but for other bread and butter issues like commodity price hikes and political tolerance. These protests have always been violently crushed by armed police.

In 2003, Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) was formed, based on principles of strategic nonviolence. WOZA was made up of ordinary poor mothers who want to be "a litmus test proving that the power of love can conquer the love of power."<sup>9</sup> It mobilizes under a motto of "Tough Love"—the "disciplining love of a parent" to fight for better governance and social justice. Some of its successful tactics are: handing out roses on Valentine's Day to "spread the love," "asking for bread" and picketing at schools in poor suburbs to register displeasure with continuous school fee increases.

Countless times WOZA members, often with their babies, have been beaten by armed police, threatened, arrested and detained in filthy jails and released without charge. But they have not succumbed to this repression. WOZA's nonviolent tactics and the simplicity and legitimacy of their message and issues—juxtaposed with the brutal punishment they get—has helped this organization earn sympathy while at the same time exposing the repression and moral bankruptcy of Mugabe's regime to the world. WOZA has tried to spread within Zimbabwe by establishing a men's wing, Men of Zimbabwe Arise (MOZA). WOZA has also achieved international recognition, and in November 2009, two of its founders and leaders, Magondonga Mahlangu and Jenni Williams, were presented with the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award by US President Barack Obama.

In the absence of basic rights of association and free expression, the internet has been influential in the fight for freedom. A plethora of foreign-based online news agencies has helped expose the regime's human rights abuses and corruption without fear of persecution.

The underground movement Zvakwana/Sokwanele ("Enough!") uses guerrilla tactics to swamp urban surfaces with so much protest graffiti that authorities fail to clean most of it—thereby allowing Zvakwana/Sokwanele's message to reach millions of citizens.

The Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA) disseminates council telephone numbers to residents and encourages them to inundate the mayor's office with calls demanding better service delivery. It also uses SMS alerts via mobile phones to raise awareness amongst residents about city events, power or water cuts, environmental pollution or arrests of members—a fast, inexpensive and effective tool to mobilize for action.

### *Volunteer Organizations*

One of the government's common strategies of repression is to overwhelm opponents with expensive lawsuits and prosecutions, including the charge of treason which is punishable by death. It has the capacity to inflict mass arrests and detentions and to deny the accused access to lawyers.

Organizations such as Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) and Zimbabwe Doctors for Human Rights (ZDHR) offer free legal representation and medical care respectively to grassroots activists who otherwise could not afford any of these in the face government persecutions. They also document cases of human rights abuses.

In fact, ZDHR, partnering with the international Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), was instrumental in fighting a disastrous cholera outbreak in late 2008 that killed over 4,000 people<sup>10</sup>, which occurred mainly due to the government's failure to provide clean tap water, collect refuse and combat sewage bursts in urban centers.



### *Negotiations*

The illegitimacy of Mugabe's "win" in the 2008 elections led his African supporters to speak out against him, particularly Botswana, Zambia and Kenya. In April 2008 South African dock workers refused to unload a Chinese ship, the *An Yue Jiang*, that carried weapons meant for Zimbabwe. Mozambique, Namibia and Angola followed suit and the ship was eventually recalled back to China.<sup>11</sup> The sudden ouster of South African President, Thabo Mbeki, the one African leader who had helped block international action against Mugabe, worsened Mugabe's isolation. Mbeki resigned in late September 2008 and was replaced by Jacob Zuma, who publicly expressed disapproval of Mugabe's excesses.

Hamstrung by Western "targeted sanctions," waning African support, and an unprecedented economic catastrophe with inflation at a record 231 million percent, Mugabe was forced to negotiate with the MDC as suggested by African leaders. The negotiations resulted in what became called the "Global Political Agreement" (GPA), which gave rise to a Government of National Unity (GNU). In February 11, 2009 the GNU began when Morgan Tsvangirai was sworn in as prime minister and Arthur Mutambara, the leader of a smaller MDC faction, became his deputy. Robert Mugabe remained Zimbabwe's president and, critically, maintained control of state security forces. Government ministers were drawn from the three parties (ZANU-PF and the two MDC formations) with ZANU-PF still retaining the majority.

Notably, civil society was from both the negotiations and coalition government. Consequently some pro-democracy organizations, notably the NCA and ZCTU, were very skeptical of whether or not the GNU would result in genuine democratic progress. Soon there became open friction between the MDC and its past civic allies. The NCA has started another "No" campaign to oppose a multiparty parliamentary committee initiative to create a new constitution, saying it's "politician driven" rather than "people driven."<sup>12</sup>

However, in justifying his choice to form the GNU, Tsvangirai argued that "This is a strategic decision of positioning a party in order to unlock the tentacles that have spread around the whole country... To democratize, cut those roots and create (favourable) conditions for free and fair elections... Without the firing of a bullet, we did it. Without losing the lives of Zimbabweans deliberately, without violence, without other known African conflicts, but we did it."<sup>13</sup> Tsvangirai has also consistently stated that he could work with Mugabe.



## **Ensuing Events:**

The GNU has achieved substantial success in restoring political and economic stability. The finance ministry (controlled by Tsvangirai's MDC faction [the MDC-T]) abolished the worthless Zimbabwean dollar, replacing it with US, South African and Botswana currencies, and launched other major reforms that stopped hyperinflation and scored some economic growth. Goods are available in shops, and services in hospitals, schools, municipalities, government departments are functioning again.

It was envisaged that the GNU would then create a new constitution and good conditions for free and fair elections in 18 months. The constitution-making process indeed commenced work but is currently 12 months behind schedule due to lack of funding and violence by some ZANU-PF activists trying to frustrate the realisation of a democratic constitution.

In defiance of the GPA president Mugabe has continued to act unilaterally, appointing public officials and changing ministerial mandates without consulting the prime minister. Mugabe has also resisted resolving some outstanding issues in the agreement such as swearing in MDC-T agriculture minister-designate Roy Bennett, and rescinding Tsvangirai's appointments of Reserve Bank governor, attorney general, provincial governors, ambassadors and other ministerial posts.<sup>14</sup> ZANU-PF says that the MDC has to convince its Western backers to remove "targeted sanctions" before it would cooperate. That poisoned the uneasy coalition, leading to Tsvangirai boycotting cabinet meetings in protest.<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of whether or not international targeted sanctions are removed, observers say that the massive discovery of diamonds in Chiadzwa, Marange in Mutare that could earn US\$1 billion annually has bolstered Mugabe's confidence in the face of dwindling international funding sources.<sup>16</sup>

On December 18, 2010, Mugabe unilaterally called for elections in mid-2011 "with or without (constitutional) reforms"<sup>17</sup> saying he's "very confident" of winning.<sup>18</sup> He said he wanted the power-sharing agreement to end, accusing the MDC of being a Western project. Opposition groups, businesses, civil society groups and the general population rejected the declaration noting that conditions were still not conducive for free and fair elections to happen. Even the electoral body (ZEC) chairman, Simpson Mtambanengwe, concurred.<sup>19</sup>

Evidently the GNU has given Mugabe and his supporters ample breathing space to reassert their grip on power. While opposition parties continue to unravel Mugabe's pillars of support, loyalty to Mugabe among state security forces remains intact after the GNU failed to reform them. The minister of defence, Emmerson Mnangagwa, the man who coordinated the violent repression during the 2008 presidential runoff election has stated that "ZANU-PF will rule forever even if

you don't want"<sup>20</sup> while ZANU-PF chairman, Simon Khaya Moyo, has urged security forces to “crash journalists.”<sup>21</sup> War veterans and soldiers have deployed countrywide where they intimidate opposition supporters and independent journalists, opposition groups and civil society activists also continue to be harassed by police.

No tangible electoral, media and security reforms have been made as promised in the GPA, as ZANU-PF insists its MDC partners must first cause the removal of “sanctions” imposed by Western countries.

Furthermore, organisations that administer elections in Zimbabwe—the ZEC and the registrar-general's office—which are accused of helping Mugabe fraudulently win elections in the past—announced after Mugabe's declaration that elections should be held in mid-2011 that they were ready for elections contradicting previous statements by ZEC chairman, Simpson Mtambanengwe.

Mugabe is also aware opposition is currently divided, fragmented and its supporters too scared of another election after the violence of the 2008 run-off. There is infighting within the two MDC factions (MDC-T and MDC-M), a revived ZAPU party, and the Mavambo/Kusile party and other new opposition parties are mushrooming, but there is no effort to form a united opposition front to challenge ZANU-PF. Any divided vote works in favour of Mugabe.

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