

# Sovereignty, the Ballot and Democratisation: Interrogating Zimbabwe's Political and Electoral Processes in the First Years of the Twenty-first Century

## Introduction

On Tuesday 22 July, 2008 the world woke up to the news that three Zimbabwean political parties, which won parliamentary representation in a plebiscite held on 29 March 2008, had signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) committing themselves 'to a dialogue with each other with a view to creating a genuine, viable, permanent and sustainable solution to the Zimbabwean situation...'<sup>1</sup> Dedicated students and followers of Zimbabwean politics would have noticed a more than telling paragraph in the MOU's preamble, which spoke to the signatories' concern about the 'recent challenges' facing the nation of Zimbabwe and the 'multiple threats' to the well-being of the people of Zimbabwe.

Signed on 21 July, 2008 under the facilitation of South African president Thabo Mbeki,<sup>2</sup> there were as many reactions to the episode as there are individuals. To some, the signing of the MOU was 'historic', (*The Herald*, 2008) marking a new era in the Zimbabwean political dispensation in which dialogue between political rivals would play a critical role in addressing the enduring presence of a variety of political, economic and social problems. For some it was 'historic', coming as it did almost four months after the country had held harmonized presidential, parliamentary and local government elections. A popular joke was doing the rounds in the Zimbabwean capital of Harare that it was not only the Beijing Olympics of 2008 in which people were witness to 'history in the making'.<sup>3</sup> It took the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission a month to announce the results of the March 2008 presidential election. There was a one-man presidential run-off election in June and four months after parliamentary elections, parliamentarians had not been sworn in. Further, the country did not have a duly constituted cabinet. In view of the foregoing, there was a sense that Zimbabwe was carving its own piece of history in terms of electoral processes and politics. Yet others would claim that the signing was no more than a concluding chapter to a narrative, which goes

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back further in time when you consider that attempts at talks between parties to the MOU go as far back as 2005.

This paper is by no means an attempt at interrogating the basic tenets of the MOU or an analysis of its broad implications. Reference is made here to the MOU because the paper contends that engaging the events leading to the signing of the MOU and events thereafter expands our circle of understanding the evolving political situation in Zimbabwe.

The MOU makes reference to 'challenges' and 'threats' confronting Zimbabwe. What are these challenges and threats confronting Zimbabwe today? How are these challenges framed by the various political actors in Zimbabwe? More importantly, how do the different interpretations play out in the country's electoral processes and its attempt at democratisation? What are the 'multiple threats' confronting the well being of the Zimbabwean citizenry? What textures the characterisation of these threats? Who is identifying the so-called threats? To what extent has the general population been part to the characterisation of the threats supposedly confronting the country? Opinions are divided on these issues. The answers depend, largely, on what one means by 'challenge' or 'threat'. The answers also depend on which side of the political spectrum one is, given that Zimbabwe has been highly polarised ever since the electoral successes of the opposition in urban areas.

If we restrict ourselves to the 'challenge' as 'economic', some would trace its roots back to the decade of the 1990s, which generally saw a decline in economic growth and a persistence of the structural problems of high poverty and inequality. Others would claim that the fast-track land reform exercise of 2000-2002 destroyed

commercial agriculture and kick-started severe macroeconomic instability and changeable supplies of food and essential commodities. Yet others would claim that the withdrawal of international support and general isolation by leading European countries are at the centre of the challenges facing Zimbabwe. If we confine ourselves to the challenge as 'political', some would once again trace its roots back to land reform, which supposedly hurt American and British interests to the extent that they have tried to effect a regime change. Others would argue that the challenge stems from a political system that is out of sync with the demands of the twenty-first century, yet others would argue that it is a simple case of poor governance. Nor can these ambiguities be avoided when it comes to unravelling of what has been obtaining in Zimbabwe's political processes since 2000. These ambiguities are also at the heart of an analysis of citizen participation in political processes in post-independent Africa.

It is the contention of this paper that at the centre of Zimbabwe's political, and by extension economic, predicament is a divergence in opinion as to the nature, form and content of the 'challenges' and 'threats' confronting the country. There is a contestation in terms of what constitutes the Zimbabwean 'situation' and the forces that have textured this situation. This paper makes an attempt to analyse the context and content of this contestation and how this has impacted on the electoral processes in Zimbabwe since 2000. The paper also attempts to situate the Zimbabwean 'situation' within the broad debate about democratization and electoral processes in twenty-first century Africa.

## The context and content of the Zimbabwe crisis after 2000

In dealing with the evolving political situation in Zimbabwe, the paper makes reference to the context, taken here to denote the setting within which political events and processes have unfolded since 2000 and the content, taken to de-

note the message various political actors (national, regional and international) have put across to the nation. I argue that Zimbabwe finds herself in a deep political divide, which divide has had a profound effect on post-2000 electoral processes and attempts at democratisation in the country.

This divide has been at various levels and has manifested itself in different guises. There is the enduring presence of a deep ideological chasm between the two main political parties in Zimbabwe; the Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) or ZANU (PF) led by President Robert Mugabe and the main faction of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, ZANU (PF), Zimbabwe's ruling party since 1980, has framed the Zimbabwean 'challenge' and 'threat' as rooted in two contentious issues:

- (i) The threat of western imperialism in general and British imperialism in particular;
- (ii) The land issue.

In the eyes of the ruling party, there is what appears to be a grand plan by western industrial powers to immobilise all former liberation movements in Africa and replace them with compliant, pro-western movements or alliances. ZANU (PF) firmly believes that white capitalist interests, led by Britain, have been at the forefront of regime change attempts in Zimbabwe. These attempts have been made through the MDC, which is seen as nothing more than a surrogate of the West. This point is exemplified in the tone and language employed by the ZANU (PF) election strategists in the build up to the June 27, 2008 Presidential Run-Off election. ZANU (PF) produced a campaign brochure entitled *100 Reasons to Vote ZANU (PF) and President R.G. Mugabe* in which the MDC's surrogacy was repeatedly emphasised. For example, part of 'Reason 2' to vote for President Mugabe read:

... one would be misled into believing that ZANU (PF) has become unpopular and President Mugabe unelectable while Morgan Tsvangirai and his foreign-funded and foreign-driven MDC... (2008: 1)

Part of 'Reason 3' to vote for President Mugabe read:

The fact that a presidential election run-off will be held on June 27 means that there is absolutely no truth to the claims of the pundits and detractors about the alleged popularity of Tsvangirai and his anti-Zimbabwean MDC (2008: 3).

The foregoing has shaped and informed ZANU (PF)'s perception of the MDC, its leaders and its agenda. Ever since the MDC was formed in 1999, ZANU (PF) has time and again branded the party as a creation of foreign interests serving the narrow interests of white Zimbabwean commercial farmers and those of Western industrial powers. The MDC has been regarded as 'anti-Zimbabwe', lacking national interest and bereft of ideas beyond the removal of ZANU (PF) from power. Notwithstanding the fact that the MDC obtained 57 out of 120 contested parliamentary seats in 2000, 43 in 2005 and that Morgan Tsvangirai received more than one million votes in the 2002 presidential election, and came just short of an absolute majority in the March 2008 elections, the MDC and the person of Morgan Tsvangirai are not seen as *bona fide* political actors in the country's political milieu. ZANU (PF) maintains that 'Zimbabwe will never be a colony again'.

It is interesting to note that during the 2002 presidential election, President Mugabe made references to the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair far more than he did to his opponent Morgan Tsvangirai. On the occasion of the country's silver jubilee-25 years of independence, in April 2005, the president in a televised interview to the nation said that as far as he was concerned, his opponent was Tony Blair and not Morgan Tsvangirai.

ZANU (PF) contends that the current impasse in the relations between the country and western countries has its roots in the fast-track land reform exercise, which started in 2000. An ambitious programme, the fast track land reform exercise sought to address severe land ownership imbalances between white and black Zimbabweans. In 1980 6000 white farmers retained 39 percent of land, the equivalent of 15.5 million hectares of prime agro-ecological farmland while black households remained confined to 41.4 percent or 16.4 million hectares of marginal land (Moyo 2004). At the end of the fast track reform exercise in 2002, an estimated 300,000 smallholder farmers had

been provided land ranging between five and ten hectares (Sachikonye 2003:3).<sup>5</sup> Land was also set aside for 51,000 black commercial farmers. If we put these figures together, we have a total of 11.5 million hectares of land changing hands within two and half years (ibid). It is this transfer of land, which for ZANU (PF), is at the heart of the 'challenge' and 'threats' that Zimbabwe is grappling with.

It seems safe to state that the MDC's response to ZANU (PF)'s nationalistic posturing has been at best muted. Whilst ZANU (PF) has framed Zimbabwe's challenges and threats as wholly foreign-derived, the MDC maintains that the 'challenge' and 'threats' facing Zimbabwe can be found closer to home because they derive from a failure of leadership. Where ZANU (PF) sees a *real* imperialist threat, the MDC sees an *imagined* threat. Where ZANU (PF) sees a Western puppet in the MDC, the MDC sees in ZANU (PF) a political party that cannot face the changes in values and organization demanded of it by a twenty-first century political and economic system (see MDC Policy document of 2007). Interestingly, the MDC occasionally makes reference to an imperialist threat as well. According to the MDC, it is ZANU (PF), through years of poor economic management and the creation of a toxic political environment, which has rendered the country vulnerable to foreign manoeuvring and, or intercession.

The MDC points to the accelerated deterioration in the socioeconomic situation of Zimbabwe, severe macroeconomic instability marked by world record inflation rates which stood at over 11million percent as of August 2008 (CSO, 2008), low foreign exchange reserves, an uncertain food security situation, high build up in domestic debt, a decline in savings and investment, and unemployment levels estimated at 80 percent (Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions 2008). The MDC points to an overriding environment punctuated by worsening economic contraction, failing and overloaded health and education delivery systems, poverty, brain drain and the attrition of HIV and AIDS. In other words, what you have in Zimbabwe is a 'humanitarian' crisis whose genesis can be found in the failing leadership of ZANU (PF) and President Mugabe. It does appear as if the MDC has been bested on the issue of land by ZANU (PF). The MDC has, largely, been reactive to the shortcomings of ZANU

(PF)'s policy. But certain concerns have been raised to illustrate the party's argument that the 'threat' the country faces is that of lack of leadership. For example, the MDC has asked:

(i) Why was land reform 'fast-tracked' without careful planning? The MDC is always very quick – as indeed are western governments – to tell the electorate that the fast-track land reform exercise coincided with reduced food production and a reduction in foreign currency earning.

(ii) In addressing the historical imbalances in terms of landholding, did the government strike the right balance between the needs of the present population and the needs of future generations?

(iii) If land reform has been a success, why did the Presidential Land Commission, referred to as the Uteke Land Review Commission, unearth multiple farm ownership, especially by senior ZANU (PF) politicians and business people aligned to ZANU (PF)?

For the MDC, the solution to the Zimbabwean crisis is change in government as seen in the party's *chinja maitiro* campaign slogan since 2000. *Chinja maitiro* is vernacular for 'change your ways'. The slogan was modified in 2005 to 'a new Zimbabwe, a new beginning', echoing the party's consistent belief in the urgent need for a makeover or transformation in the way the country is run. The modified slogan is premised on the assumption that Zimbabwe needs a complete break with the *status quo*, which is marked by a noxious political milieu. As far as the MDC is concerned, the country is under threat from despotism, corruption and a deficiency in democratic ideals.

### Media and public security laws and the electoral process in Zimbabwe

What has been the broad consequence of the foregoing in terms of democratisation and electoral processes and politics in Zimbabwe in the period under review? Critics of ZANU (PF) point to legislation such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), enacted in 2002 and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), also enacted in 2002 and amended in 2007, as evidence of the contraction in civil liberties and democratic space in recent years. AIPPA was enacted to oversee the operation of print

and electronic media in the country. The Act has been slated for its stringent conditionalities when it comes to the establishment or registration of private or independent media practitioners. Critics have argued that the legislation has left the general populace at the mercy of a partisan and unprofessional state media, which has openly supported ZANU (PF) and demonised the MDC and its supporters under the guise of 'guarding the country's independence'.

POSA was enacted to oversee a range of issues regarding public order and security. Political gatherings and meetings for example, require the sanction of the police before they can proceed. Should the police rule that the gathering might be a threat to public security; the meeting cannot legally go ahead. The MDC has consistently argued that this law has been turned into a political instrument by ZANU (PF) to undermine opposition voter outreach programmes. For ZANU (PF), such legislation is at the centre of the country's defence of its dominion. As far as ZANU (PF) is concerned, creating political space for such entities as the MDC is tantamount to weakening state institutions, thus making the country vulnerable to hostile foreign interests. For its part, the MDC supported the institution of 'targeted sanctions' against ZANU (PF) officials by the European Union because ZANU (PF) officials 'lack credibility'.

### The rural-urban conundrum in Zimbabwean electoral politics

One discernible feature of post-2000 Zimbabwean politics is the rural-urban divide in terms of voting patterns. These voting patterns suggest a very strong rural support for ZANU (PF) and a very strong urban support for the MDC. In the 2000 parliamentary election for example, all but two of the MDC's 57 seats were from urban constituencies. In that same election, ZANU (PF) won only one urban constituency. In the 2005 parliamentary election, the same trend continued even though ZANU (PF) was to win a few urban constituencies following a constituency delimitation exercise, which resulted in some previously rural and urban constituencies being collapsed into one. In 2008, the trend of 2005 was reversed somewhat. The MDC-T made some significant inroads into the rural areas and ended up garnering 100 parliamentary seats to ZANU (PF)'s 99 and the MDC-M's 10. Of ZANU

(PF)'s 99 seats, only two are from urban constituencies.

It has been variously argued that ZANU (PF)'s agenda of land redistribution finds a ready audience among rural voters who feel the country is not independent as long as the colonial land imbalance persists. I would argue that such an agenda resonates with most black people in general and its acceptance is not in any way limited to the rural areas. Conversely, the MDC's agenda for change is said to resonate with urban voters. It has also been suggested that the MDC enjoys urban support because of its close links with the national federation of labour. It seems a synthetic explanation when one considers that the majority of Zimbabwean workers are not unionised. It could be that most urban residents still remember the time when Tsvangirai campaigned vigorously against the harmful effects of ESAP such as retrenchment, trade and labour liberalisation. There is a paucity of systematic, disaggregated data in terms of the voting trends across gender, class, ethnicity, rural, urban etc. In the absence of such an analysis, it is difficult to establish if the trends are actually permanent, semi-permanent or temporary. The 2005 and 2008 elections in particular do muddy the waters because of the upswings and downswings in support for the two parties.

Interestingly, neither of the two main political parties concedes it is unpopular in either the urban or rural areas. ZANU (PF) claims that it still enjoys substantial support in the urban areas and urban voters vote the opposition out of 'protest'. In this view, urban voters are seen as still loyal to ZANU (PF) in their hearts but vote the opposition as a sign of their dissatisfaction with 'certain' issues within the party. In the words of one senior ZANU (PF) official, MDC is a 'passing cloud'. The 'cloud' seems to be taking quite a while to pass though, because in the last eight years, not only has it not 'passed', but it does seem to have been getting darker and darker to the extent of threatening a huge thunderstorm. On its part, the MDC has consistently argued that it is a myth that ZANU (PF) enjoys overwhelming support in the rural areas. The MDC claims that it has as much support in the rural areas as it has in the urban areas but ZANU (PF) has always found it easier to either rig the rural vote or seal off the areas through violence or

militias. The MDC claims that a free and fair election would prove its claims. The MDC says that ZANU (PF) uses intimidation and violence in the rural areas because it is aware of its lack of support.

This voter configuration has also meant that there has been contestation over which party deserves to be called 'national' in terms of having support right across the country as opposed to regionally or ethnically determined support. The rural constituencies have therefore become a contested terrain in Zimbabwean electoral politics. In 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2008 presidential run-off elections, the rural areas were declared as virtual no-go areas for opposition political parties. There was widespread intimidation and in places, physical violence. In one of his campaign speeches in the lead up to the 2002 presidential elections, President Mugabe particularly thanked rural voters for consistently voting his party. He contrasted the rural voters with the urban voters whom he said had lost focus of national ideals *nekunakirwa nezvihwitsi* (as a result of the sweet taste of candy).

The enduring contestation over the rural vote has meant that rural voters have been, for the better part of the last eight years, largely subjected to state propaganda, intimidation and violence in varying degrees. There has been intimidation and violence in the urban areas as well but it does not seem to have had as much effect as it has had in the rural areas where relative illiteracy, intimidation and violence have combined to erode civic rights. This has seen a reversal of the process of creating political space for the citizenry, which the government committed to, not only in the country's constitution but in international protocols as well. For instance, the government is bound by the Southern African Development Cooperation (SADC) Protocol on elections, which hold that elections have to be 'free and fair' in terms of affording all political players equal access to the public media as well as upholding the players' rights to free campaigning in any part of the country. There is also the matter of urban voters having the freedom to exercise their democratic right without being called names or being insulted. It is hard to think people experiencing the above scenarios can actively participate in a democracy.

### Realignment of voting blocs in the post 2000 period

If we cast our eyes to the period from 2000, we discern some realignment of Zimbabwe's configuration of voting blocs. Zimbabwe has ten administrative provinces, namely, Bulawayo, Harare, Manicaland, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Masvingo, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South and Midlands. Bulawayo and Harare are urban areas. Prior to the 2000 parliamentary elections, ZANU (PF)'s support in Harare, Mashonaland, Manicaland and Masvingo provinces was fairly solid. ZANU (PF)'s support in the Mashonaland provinces has remained largely solid but support in the provinces of Harare, Manicaland and Masvingo in particular has been receding manifestly since 2000. The opposition MDC has tapped into this dissatisfaction by voters and, as results of the 2008 harmonised elections show, has made some very significant inroads into these provinces. It is doubtful that the growth in MDC support in Harare, Manicaland and Masvingo is wholly attributable to the organisational capability of the MDC itself. It seems safe to assume that it is partly down to ZANU (PF)'s internal politics and partly to the mobilisation efforts of the MDC.

For some time now, the issue of succession has been gathering momentum in ZANU (PF). Historically, ZANU (PF)'s support comes from the majority Shona ethnic group (comprising mostly of the Karanga, Manyika and Zezuru subgroups). The party's organisational structure has always striven to strike the right balance in terms of leadership positions between these three Shona subgroups. The expectation has been that since the current party leader (President Mugabe) is from the Zezuru subgroup, the next leader should come from either of the two remaining subgroups (Karanga and Manyika). When the then Vice President of the country and party, Simon Muzenda, died in 2004, the internecine battles related to ZANU (PF) succession politics became very intense and began to assume a regional/tribal dimension. Muzenda was from the Karanga subgroup, which, demographically, is the biggest among the Shona. He was subsequently replaced by a woman from the Zezuru subgroup under very controversial circumstances. The move was interpreted as furthering Zezuru hegemony

and fissures within the party along tribal lines widened.

The two Matabeleland and Bulawayo provinces have traditionally voted for the opposition. Apart from a brief period in the late 1980s and early 1990s when ZANU (PF) and PF ZAPU merged, these provinces have largely been inhospitable to ZANU (PF). Since 2000, these two provinces have consistently voted the opposition. There are persistent silences about the dissent in these provinces. In the 2008 harmonised elections, they largely voted for the smaller faction of the MDC, prompting analysts to ask what the issues were there. There has been a misconception that one corner of the country consistently stands out as not following the herd. The reality is that actually two corners of the country stand out. Along with Bulawayo and the two Matabeleland provinces, Chipinge constituency in Manicaland province has also consistently voted for the opposition. However, it is the Matabeleland question which has often captured the attention of observers. The simplistic explanation would be that voting is driven by tribal/ethnic disposition. Matabeleland is predominantly inhabited by the Ndebele ethnic group. After independence there were disturbances in those two provinces, which allegedly resulted in the death of about 20,000 people. The people of these two provinces also argue that their provinces are relatively underdeveloped because of their support for a rival political and military movement before and after independence.

Regardless of what the issues are, the Matabeleland provinces voted overwhelmingly for the MDC in the 2000, 2002 and 2005 elections. Critics were quick to point out that it was because a significant number of the MDC leadership came from these two provinces. At the time, the Vice President, Secretary General, Treasurer, Spokesperson and Director of Elections for the party were from Bulawayo, Matabeleland North and South provinces. After the 2005 split of the MDC, the smaller faction (MDC-M) became to be associated with tribal politics due to the composition of its leadership and membership. The party co-opted Arthur Mutambara (a Shona) as its leader, but this was largely seen as an attempt at political correctness. During the 2008 harmonised elections, voters' allegiance in Bulawayo, Matabeleland North and South was split between the mainstream

(MDC-T) and the smaller faction (MDC-M). MDC-M did well in the rural constituencies and MDC-T in the urban areas. It is hard to explain what textured these voting patterns, but it is clear that allegiances were re-aligned. The results however, confirmed the general perception people had about MDC-M: that it was a regional party with no support outside rural Matabeleland.

This by no means makes the people from these provinces tribalists. The same can also be said of the Shona people who have consistently voted ZANU (PF). It is a common enough phenomenon where regionalism is a key feature of voting. What has been difficult to comprehend is the choice of MDC-M over MDC-T in rural Matabeleland. MDC-M did not have a presidential candidate. It is not clear what difference in policy there is with MDC-T. The difference between them seems to be more of personalities than ideological. It does not tell us why the voters went with MDC-M but I think it tells us a lot about MDC-T and the apparent deficiencies in its organizational capacity. They lost seats that they comfortably won in 2005 to a party whose entire leadership lost in parliamentary elections. They lost to a party that has no recognizable structures, leaving me with the conclusion that MDC-M did not win those seats. Rather, the MDC-T lost them.

In concluding this section, the association between ethnicity and politics is never as straightforward as we often try to make it. There are many variables, which are not at all related to ethnicity or succession, which account for ZANU (PF)'s reduced support among its former strongholds. It is the contention of this paper that party succession politics and the perceived Zezuru supremacy have alienated ZANU (PF) from some of its former strongholds. Some of them have since found a home in the MDC. There are still some organisational deficiencies within MDC-T, which have militated against the party tapping into many disgruntled voters to the extent that these deficiencies might have cost them the presidency in the March 2008 election.

### **Liberation war veterans**

Zimbabwe's evolving political and electoral situation would not be complete without reference being made to the increasingly visible and influential role that has been played by liberation war veterans

since 2000 under the aegis of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA). The ZNLWVA was formed as a welfare association for those who fought in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle for independence. In the first two decades of independence the war veterans played absolutely no role in mainstream politics. In fact, most of them remained on the fringes of the country's political and economic affairs. This was to change with the coming to leadership of the association of the late Chenjerai Hunzvi in the late 1990s. Hunzvi was to transform the veterans from being an invisible to a vocal, militant and, by all accounts, reviled segment of ZANU (PF).

Hunzvi's crowning moment was to come in the lead up to the June 2000 parliamentary elections when he spearheaded the invasion of white commercial farms by the war veterans, war collaborators and some supporters of the ruling party. Commercial farm workers were particularly targeted for their alleged role in the government losing a constitutional referendum in February of the same year. A campaign that was ostensibly meant to empower blacks culminated in some unprecedented black-on-black electoral violence in post-independent Zimbabwe. Hundreds of farm workers were subsequently displaced and disenfranchised from the 2000 election. The authorities remained indifferent. There was a sense that most of the farm workers were of foreign origin and were supposed to go back to their countries. Statistics however, showed that the majority of commercial farm workers were Zimbabwean (Rutherford 2008, Sachikonye 2003). Rutherford in particular notes the uneasy fit of commercial farm workers within the political and economic development of post-colonial Zimbabwe, reduced by a nationalist liberation war binary of exploitation/abuse by racist white settlers.

Since 2000, the liberation war veterans have been an integral part of the ZANU (PF) electoral machinery. They helped set up military-style, political 're-education' (read intimidation, partisan rhetoric etc.) camps for the 2000, 2002 and 2008 presidential run-off elections. The camps were set up so that alleged 'sell-outs' or 'reactionaries' (read opposition supporters) could be sent for 'political re-education' (read beatings, insults, sometimes rape etc). There are well documented cases of

torture and rape at these camps. However, not every war veteran has participated in violence and not every liberation war veteran is a member of the ZNLWVA. Further, not everything that these elements were doing was sanctioned by the state or by ZANU (PF). There are documented arrests of people who were engaged in political violence, suggesting the work of renegades. It is fair however, to ask why these elements are never arrested during and not after the event. Arresting them after the event creates an impression that the violence is state-sanctioned. What is clear is that there is a militant and radical element within ZNLWVA that has shaped and informed the association's activities in the last eight or so years.

### **The MDC's image problem**

There have always been lingering concerns regarding what the MDC stands for beyond Robert Mugabe's removal from office. Legitimate concerns have been raised over whose feelings the MDC are trying to assure by focusing on the necessary yet narrow agenda of removing one person from office. The MDC was formed in September 1999 with very strong backing from the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). At its formation, its interim president was Gibson Sibanda, the then President of the ZCTU. The interim Vice President was Morgan Tsvangirai, the then secretary general of the ZCTU. At its first congress, Tsvangirai was elected President and Sibanda Vice President. Other unionists were to take up key positions in the party structures. The MDC also had in its ranks lawyers and academics. In the end, it became a broad, loose alliance bringing on board associates with varied political, social and economic backgrounds.

Having touted itself as a mass movement, it emerged during the 2000 parliamentary elections that a great number of white commercial farmers were funding the MDC election campaign. This was to present the MDC with a problem. Queries were raised as to the true intention of the white commercial farmers. ZANU (PF) was quick to pounce on that and told the world that its view that the MDC was a front for white interests had been vindicated. The MDC argued that the participation by whites was an indication that the party was creating democratic space for every citizen of Zimbabwe.

In the 2000 parliamentary election, the MDC was to field a number of white candidates, four of whom made it to parliament. Conventionally, white Zimbabweans took a back seat in mainstream politics in post-independent Zimbabwe. The question is why white Zimbabweans adopted this apathetic approach to politics after independence only to suddenly find the inclination and drive to be active in 2000? It seems fair to assume that there was an unwritten *détente* between ZANU (PF) and the white establishment in the period after independence. In return for an apathetic approach to national politics, white Zimbabweans were guaranteed economic privileges that they enjoyed during the colonial period. After all, it is a political truism that 'rights' are not simply givens, but products of social and political creation and manipulation (see Morris 2006, Morgan 2004 and Wilson 1997). This was to change in 2000 when the commercial farmers decided not only to enter into active politics but to throw their lot behind the MDC. Analysing the nexus between race, class and politics in apartheid South Africa, Leo Kuper (1965) referred to an inner turmoil that white South Africans used to experience during the apartheid period. Kuper (*ibid.*) documents how white South Africans were suffering from a sense of alienation, thus finding themselves in an ambiguous situation where they lacked a political tradition. It maybe that white Zimbabweans began to feel that way, but the fact that they had no such feelings for 20 years takes away from the credibility of such an argument. The only reason left is that they began to feel economically threatened by land reform and found in the MDC a party that was prepared to guarantee them protection in return for funding.

It is remarkable that Morgan Tsvangirai is accused of being a front for white interests. In 1996, the ZCTU produced a position paper on a five-year economic recovery programme that the government had implemented in 1990. Titled 'Beyond ESAP: Framework for a long-term development strategy in Zimbabwe' (1996), the paper identified land and land reform as crucial to the economic progression of the country. As the face of the ZCTU, Morgan Tsvangirai was at the forefront of criticising the government for adopting a World Bank and IMF-funded economic programme. At the time, the government was saying that ESAP was home grown and Tsvangirai virtually went on a 'who home

grew ESAP?' campaign. It is remarkable that the MDC-T leader now finds himself being accused of lacking a nationalist orientation. What has fed this representation of him is that he does not talk about these issues as forcefully as he used to in his day as the Secretary General of the ZCTU. This has often been construed to mean that he is taking care not to hurt his support among economically powerful white people. There are legitimate concerns as to why Tsvangirai or the MDC do not highlight the land question to neutralise ZANU PF's monopoly on 'nationalist' claims. There is a school of thought which holds that the MDC lost many opportunities by attempting to be different from ZANU PF when they should have just come up with a workable alternative vision on land equity.

We have already seen that the MDC was joined and supported by commercial farmers and other white business people who previously controlled the economy. By virtue of their capital and social capital, they assumed a crucial role behind the scenes including giving MDC its first offices in a swanky party of Harare. One of the lasting images broadcast by the national broadcaster, ZTV, in 2000 was of a group of white commercial farmers signing checks and pledging support for the MDC at a meeting with Morgan Tsvangirai. The meeting was at the farm of one of the participants to the meeting. This was damaging for the MDC in two ways. First, the white commercial farmers' brazenness gave the world the impression that white commercial interests had taken charge of the party. Second, there was the dicey subject of employers (capital) joining forces with the working class (labour), especially at a time when their capital (land) was in the process of being seized. To observers, it was not clear how the MDC could manage essentially conflictual interests of poor blacks together with/against those of rich whites. These concerns become even more relevant when we cast our eyes back to the period 1995-1998 when the government listed 1500 commercial farms for redistribution and the same farmers negotiated for the farms not to be taken. They managed to reduce the number to 400 by 1998 (see Moyo 2000). These events raise questions about the intentions of such alliances.

To be fair to Tsvangirai and the MDC-T, there is a comprehensive MDC-T policy document entitled 'A New Zimbabwe, A

New Beginning' in which twelve pages are dedicated to the resolution of the land question, agrarian reform and agriculture. One wonders why it has been a big problem for the party to articulate its position on these critical issues. This has fed into the ZANU (PF) rhetoric that MDC politicians are opportunists advancing Britain's agenda of. Has the MDC become a victim of its loose membership? Some would say yes. Has the presence of white farmers created an image problem for the MDC? Absolutely. Not only have they created an image problem for the party; they seem to play a big role in setting the agenda as well. Is MDC a Western creation? Absolutely not. The MDC has been in four general elections between 2000 and 2008 and have done reasonably well. Branding it as 'British' is probably offensive to the party's supporters and by extension, millions of Zimbabweans. Looking at the March 2008 election results, only the MDC-T can claim to be a truly national party as it has parliamentary representation in each of the country's ten provinces. The smaller MDC's support is limited to two rural provinces and ZANU (PF)'s support is negligible in the urban areas. Questions linger as regards the ideological position of the party but to label it as a British creation is to ignore the facts on the ground, which show that for eight years, the party has grown to become a key player in Zimbabwean politics.

### ZANU (PF), MDC and the democratic space

Both parties have had to deal with 'in-house' problems pertaining to their democratic ideals, which problems have also impacted on the country's electoral landscape. In 2002 President Mugabe said that he would consider stepping down in 2008. He encouraged members from his party to start discussing leadership renewal and succession. There was to be serious jostling for power within the party to the extent that the party's presidium perceived the jostling to be divisive and detrimental to the party. After a few months of debate, the succession issue was 'officially' closed on the grounds that it was harming the cohesiveness of the party. President Mugabe was to become the ZANU (PF) presidential candidate for 2008 on the back of serious divisions within his own party as members questioned the manner in which he had secured the nomination. The President admitted as much after the March 2008 election when he was address-

ing his party's central committee. He acknowledged that the party had gone into the election 'divided'.

The MDC was confronted with a major decision in 2005. Following the introduction of an upper house of parliament (Senate), there were sharp differences within the MDC leadership whether to participate in the senatorial elections or not. One group led by the President was of the view that propitious conditions for free and fair elections were lacking and the party should boycott the elections in protest. The other group led by the Secretary General was of the view that boycotting elections would give ZANU (PF) a free rein and it was better to participate and try to effect change from within. So sharp were the differences that the matter went to a vote in a national council meeting. Reports vary on what exactly ensued during the vote. Some reports say the pro-participation faction won by a single vote but the President unconstitutionally overturned the vote. Other reports say there was tie in the votes at which point the President cast his vote on the side of the anti-participation faction. Either way, the differences were so sharp that the factions formally parted ways. The faction led by the secretary general was to invite Professor Arthur Mutambara who was not in mainstream politics at the time to come and lead it.

In concluding this section, reference needs to be made to a phenomenon common in African political processes – the personal popularity of the party leader. Both President Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai enjoy immense personal popularity among their supporters to the extent that they are almost synonymous with the parties that they represent. It is safe to say that both have virtually carried their respective parties in the elections since 2000. ZANU (PF) has become very unpopular in most parts of the country but still gets some valuable votes because of President Mugabe. Most MDC parliamentarians are virtually small time political opportunists who have had their time in the sun on account of their leader's high name recognition. President Mugabe's popularity stems from his role in the country's liberation struggle, whereas Tsvangirai's derives from his late 1980s anti-corruption drive and his dissenting voice against ESAP in the 1990s. It is cause concern when this concept of a 'big' leader continues to be part of the

African political landscape. The implication is that focus is still on personalities rather than issues and, or party structures.

### Civil society

The post-2000 era has also seen a proliferation of civic groups, which in my opinion have done little to bring about any meaningful change in Zimbabwe's political dispensation. Civil society in Zimbabwe fits the caricature portrayed in Håkan Thörn (2007)'s seminal piece on social movements. Often involving antagonistic relationships, the different movements have in common that their identities are defined in anti-establishment terms (ibid). In places, they have often made an attempt to constitute themselves into alternative political cultures. Results have been mixed. They have tried to create a context for articulating 'new' issues and 'identities' where such concepts as constitution making, governance, transparency, role of the media, electoral processes etc., are given central roles. It has been difficult to measure their level of success. Most of them have had to deal with internal problems of their own in terms of resource use and governance, a result of which has been that most have since lost credibility and have had no consequential involvement in the country's electoral processes and political dispensation.

It is interesting to note that most of the civic groups have elected to embrace narrow neoliberal definitions and discourses of 'democracy', human rights 'respect for property rights' etc., when most Zimbabweans are poor, lack decent housing and have no property to be respected. Clearly, political opportunism is in evidence here because no donor would support civil society anti-Mugabe campaigns if, say, they came out forcefully in support of land reform. Instead, civil societies have latched onto the simplistic notion of 'economic mismanagement', without really addressing the fundamental challenges facing the country like an equitable distribution of productive resources such as land and water.

### Harmonised presidential, parliamentary and local government elections

Zimbabwe held its first ever harmonised elections on 29 March 2008. The messages for the parties remained the same. For ZANU (PF), Zimbabwe could 'never be a colony again'. For MDC-T, vote was

for a 'new Zimbabwe' and a 'new beginning'. The smaller faction of the MDC, after months of behind the scenes negotiations to rally behind a single candidate (Tsvangirai) finally decided to throw its weight behind the independent candidate Dr Simba Makoni whose campaign platform was to get Zimbabwe 'working again'.

The environment was as good as it could get. All parties and candidates had access to the public media. Campaigning was done freely in both the rural areas and urban areas. They were judged to be the most peaceful elections in post-independent Zimbabwe. MDC-T got 100 parliamentary seats, 25 Senatorial seats and 48 percent of the presidential vote. ZANU (PF) obtained 99 parliamentary seats, 30 senatorial seats and 43 percent of the presidential vote. The other MDC faction obtained ten parliamentary and five senatorial seats. Dr Makoni received eight percent of the presidential vote. For the first time in Zimbabwe's electoral history, an independent parliamentarian was able to retain his seat. The will of the people had been expressed. However, neither Tsvangirai nor Mugabe had amassed enough votes to be declared President.

### The presidential run off

The presidential run-off election brought out the good and the bad in Zimbabwe's electoral processes. Holding the election demonstrated the government's commitment and respect for a constitutional requirement. The bad in the sense that ZANU (PF) introduced a completely new dimension to the electoral process and a message the country was not expecting to hear almost three decades after independence. President Mugabe's campaign team began campaigning on the platform that the 'gun was mightier than the pen' and that what the gun had brought, the pen could not take away. In keeping with the belief that Western powers wanted to effect a regime change in the country, the run off was framed as the last opportunity to defend the country's independence. Anyone and anything that was perceived to be standing in the way of this objective was to be crushed. In the words of Patrick Chinamasa, then acting Minister of Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, were Tsvangirai to win the presidential election run-off, it would have 'a destabilising effect on Zimbabwe' because MDC-T was 'anti Zimbabwe'.<sup>6</sup>



At a campaign rally in Zimbabwe's second largest city, President Mugabe said that even if people voted for the MDC-T, it would be a 'wasted vote' because power would not be handed over to 'puppets of the British'. There were specific threats that the country would go back to war in the event of MDC-T winning. In places, the President and other party officials would sound conciliatory saying at campaign rallies they would respect the result of the election. However, that conciliatory tone was always qualified by a rejoinder that they did not think that their own party would lose the elections so the question of accepting the outcome was academic.

The message from ZANU (PF) may have been contradictory in places but the environment was not. Campaign bases were set up in every corner of the country under the code name 'Operation *makavhotera papi* (Operation who did you vote for?). In Harare, there were various sub-operations under different code names. These ranged from 'Mugabe kuoffice, June 27' (Mugabe back in office come June 27) to M.A.D.Z.A, an acronym for *Mugabe Achatonga Dzamara Afa* (Mugabe will rule until he dies). There was violence, with the MDC-T claiming that over 60 of its members were killed by ZANU (PF) militias in the lead up to the run off election. The state denied these claims and argued that it was MDC supporters who were engaged in violent acts against ZANU (PF) supporters even though there are no documented cases of opposition supporters who were convicted of election-related violence. The opposition had no access to the sole public broadcaster, in clear violation of the country's electoral law. Once again, the rural areas were sealed off and were no go areas for the MDC. Five days before the holding of the run off election, MDC-T had a scheduled campaign rally disrupted by alleged ZANU (PF) supporters. There were violent scenes at the scheduled venue. It was at this point that Morgan Tsvangirai announced his withdrawal from the run off election. In his words, given what was going on, it was a 'sham election'<sup>7</sup> with a predetermined outcome. The run-off was to take place all the same with President Mugabe as the sole candidate.

### **Government of National Unity (GNU)**

The Government of National Unity is Zimbabwe's coalition government that was formed on 13 February 2009 following the inaugurations of Morgan Tsvangirai as Prime Minister and Thokozani Khuphe and Arthur Mutambara as Deputy Prime Ministers. It is a coalition organized among President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front, Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change, and Mutambara's MDC, as agreed to during negotiations which took place following the signing of the MOU. These negotiations culminated in the signing of a Global Political Agreement (GPA) on 11 September 2008.

Following the GPA's signing, 'sticking points' for the implementation of the agreements in the fourth quarter 2008 were the allocation of Cabinet positions between the two MDC factions and ZANU (PF), particularly the key Ministries of Finance, Defence, Local Government, Information, Justice and Home Affairs. The negotiations stalled until late January 2009, when the MDC-T agreed to share the Ministry of Home Affairs with ZANU-PF on a rotating basis, as advised by the Southern African Development Community.

It is fair to say that opposition to the GNU was fierce from some quarters in both ZANU (PF) and MDC-T. MDC-M seems to have been the only enthusiastic partner to the GNU. However, the formation of the GNU gave President Mugabe the legitimacy that he lacked following the disputed elections in 2002 and the presidential run-off election in June 2008. The GNU put to rest ZANU (PF)'s previous assertion that Tsvangirai would never be in the corridors of power because he was a proxy for the British. President Mugabe acknowledged as much in a television interview with the national broadcaster (Zimbabwe Television) on the eve of independence celebrations in April 2009. He said that it was after the 2008 harmonised elections that it dawned on ZANU (PF) that 'people supported other parties' (some supporters of the MDC quipped, 'where have they been in the last ten years?'). Finally, the GNU gave a political lifeline to the leadership of the Mutambara group who had lost their parliamentary bids in the March 2008 elections. Mutambara did not run for the presidency but finds himself as one of

the country's deputy Prime Ministers due to what some have referred to as Mbeki's machinations to offset Tsvangirai's bargaining power.

Almost 30 years after a government of national unity was formed in 1980 to promote racial and ethnic co-existence in a postcolonial Zimbabwe, the country finds itself with yet another unity government. In 1980, the unity government was to be an instrument of post-colonial reconstruction, social redistribution and economic growth. Thirty years down the line, President Mugabe finds in the new GNU the resolution of the legitimacy issue that has hung over his head for a while now. Tsvangirai sees in the GNU the transition to ultimate MDC-T rule. Not much is known about what the GNU means to MDC-M beyond frustrating their erstwhile colleagues in MDC-T. The formation of the GNU seems to have enhanced MDC-M's reputation as a 'spoiler'. This view is especially strong among MDC-T supporters who feel that if MDC-M had not divided the vote in March 2008, their party would have won an outright majority in both the parliamentary and presidential elections.

The GNU itself mirrors the Zimbabwean electoral landscape of recent years. In the March 2008 harmonised elections, not a single party won an outright majority. ZANU (PF) and MDC-T emerged the big winners with ZANU (PF) solid in the rural areas. A significant number of rural and urban councils fell to MDC-T. Zimbabweans do see some good in both ZANU (PF) and MDC. It should not escape one's attention however, that Zimbabwe did not have a duly-constituted government for almost a year after the harmonised elections of March 2008. It puts into question the whole notion of electoral processes. There is no question that most ordinary Zimbabweans welcomed the signing of the GPA. What they did not welcome was the jockeying for positions that followed the GPA. There was a sense that political interests were taking precedence over the interests of ordinary citizens. The constitutional amendments that accompanied the formation of the GNU, commonly referred to as Amendment 19, were considered 'too personalised'. For example, it is specifically written in the constitutional amendment that the Office of Prime Minister 'shall be occupied by Morgan Tsvangirai'.



The formation of the GNU in Zimbabwe came against the backdrop of a comparable arrangement in Kenya where a disputed presidential election result culminated in the formation of a unity government. One wonders whether we are witnessing a new trend in African electoral processes where the outcome of elections is disputed, leading to governments of national unity. The Kenyan unity government, which preceded the Zimbabwean one, faces many challenges to the extent that the prognosis is far from reassuring. Parties to the Zimbabwean GNU concede that the government is transitional. The government's life span is variously put at two to five years. A new constitution is supposed to be in place 18-24 months after the inception of the GNU. This new constitution is supposed to form the basis for new elections. Interestingly, ZANU (PF) and MDC-T seem to be receptive to the idea of new elections once the new constitution is in place. MDC-M is pushing for a full term (five years) for the GNU. The value we can distil from that is that both ZANU (PF) and MDC-T are confident that they have the numbers to be competitive in a national election. MDC-M seems to be drifting and consensus seems to be building that the party has to find an identity or it will be history come the next election.

### Conclusion

Zimbabwe is by no means the only African country grappling with political and economic challenges. As with most of Africa, the challenges have their roots in internal and external variables. An understanding of the evolving political situation in Zimbabwe requires an understanding of how the different political actors have framed the challenges confronting the country. In places, the challenges have been framed for political expediency. In places, the arguments are compelling. As this paper has tried to il-

lustrate, from the Zimbabwe case, we learn about the complexities associated with nation building in postcolonial Africa. Striking a balance between self-determination and sustainable prosperity has proved to a big challenge.

### Notes

1. 'Declaration of Commitment in the Memorandum of Understanding between the Zimbabwe African Union (Patriotic Front) and the two Movement for Democratic Change Formations'.
2. President Thabo Mbeki was appointed by members of the Southern African Development Cooperation (SADC) to facilitate the talks.
3. 'Witness history in the making' was the catchphrase for the Beijing Olympics.
4. In 2005, the MDC split into two formations. MDC-T led by Tsvangirai and MDC-M led by A. Mutambara.
5. The total number of beneficiaries under this scheme has been a subject of debate.
6. Minister Patrick Chinamasa addressing a press conference in Cape Town in April 2008.
7. Morgan Tsvangirai addressing a press conference in Harare, 21 June 2008.

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