

The Battle over Zimbabwe's Future

By [Gregory Elich](#)

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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Amid heightened tension, an all pervading crisis is afflicting Zimbabwe. The economy is close to collapse, the standard of living has plummeted, and the political scene is marred by recent violence. To hear Western leaders tell it, it is Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe who has brought this state of affairs upon his nation through economic mismanagement and repression, and what would have been an otherwise prosperous country is instead on the edge of ruin. The U.S. and Great Britain trade barbs with Zimbabwe, and relations are perhaps at their lowest point, with pressure mounting in the U.S. and Great Britain for harsher measures.

There are many in the West who have joined the chorus denouncing the Mugabe government and call for its replacement with a "democratic government." The hostile reaction against Zimbabwe is not surprising when one considers that the flood of news reports is notable for its uniformity and lack of context. A single message is repeated in the media. The ruling party, the Zimbabwean African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), rules through undemocratic means, we are told, while the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) enjoys wide support and is kept from power through repression. Western leaders seek only to promote democracy and prosperity in the region. This is the popular image in the Western press, and few question its veracity. How information is formulated, including what does not get reported, demonstrates some of the ways perception is managed and support for policy objectives is generated.

The beating of several MDC members while in police custody following their arrest triggered the latest upsurge of condemnation of the Zimbabwean government. MDC supporters were arrested merely for holding an innocuous prayer meeting, we were told, and the government's resort to violence was unprovoked.

The "prayer meeting" was in fact a demonstration that was part of the MDC-led Save Zimbabwe Campaign's month-long "defiance" campaign. By calling the demonstration a "prayer meeting," organizers hoped to get around the government's four-month ban on demonstrations that had been instituted after a rally the month before resulted in running battles between the police and crowds of MDC supporters. The "prayer meeting" tag was also useful for managing Western perception. (1)

Troubles began on the morning of March 11 when a handful of demonstrators were arrested as they headed to the rally site. At around noon, a group of MDC supporters attacked three unarmed police officers. One officer managed to escape, but the other two were beaten and suffered serious head injuries.

During the next hour several more demonstrators were arrested as they attempted to enter the rally site, including Arthur Mutambara, leader of one faction of the MDC. A while

later, MDC gangs at a shopping center hurled rocks at a bus, smashing its windows, and then attempted set an army vehicle afire. (2)

Despite a determined effort by the police, more than a thousand demonstrators did make it to the rally. When Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of a second MDC faction, arrived with his arms raised in the air, the crowd responded noisily. According to an MDC supporter, "the situation was getting heated" after police attempted to keep Tsvangirai apart from the crowd. "Tsvangirai and the police were arguing, and we were carrying on singing and shouting, louder and louder. In all there were only about thirty police and there were more than one thousand - we were too many for them. They could not control what was happening." Police lobbed tear gas canisters to disperse the crowd and Tsvangirai and other MDC officials were hustled into two police cars and driven away. (3)

Demonstrators responded by throwing rocks and tear gas canisters at the police, while some in the crowd used slingshots to fire metal bolts. The crowd advanced, as the police fired 19 warning volleys in the air without effect. At this point, one officer aimed his rifle at a demonstrator and shot him dead. "Then everything became worse," recalled an MDC supporter. "We went on the rampage and we did not even fear for our lives. There was a lot of action" as demonstrators "threw punches." Chased by the crowd, the police ran to their pickup trucks, but not all of the officers were lucky enough to escape. "About six or eight of them were left with us," said the MDC supporter. "As they ran some of them dropped their batons so we picked up their discarded sticks and used them to beat" them. "The police were badly beaten," after which the crowd "left the police on the side of the road and ran away." (4)

Meanwhile, MDC supporters elsewhere in Harare overturned a commuter omnibus and later stopped a kombi (commuter van). After looting the luggage, they doused the vehicle with gasoline and set it afire. A number of cars were stoned and one was overturned. (5)

Demonstrators who had been taken into custody and were brought to police stations in Avondale and Harare Central were treated with respect. A different fate awaited those taken to the Machipisa station, where detainees were ordered to lay down in the courtyard, whereupon they were kicked and beaten with clubs for about an hour. It is not entirely clear who administered the beatings, and at least one report suggests that it was not police but either a commando group or a pro-government militia that was responsible. (6)

Western governments and media wasted no time in condemning the government of Zimbabwe. The beatings were severe, and several individuals suffered broken bones. Western critics ignored MDC violence and singled out the government for sole blame, making the most of the incident's propaganda value.

Faced with a barrage of criticism by its Western detractors, Zimbabwe badly mishandled the situation. That no attempt was made to investigate the beatings only fueled the anti-Zimbabwe campaign and handed the opposition a catalyzing issue. The government's inaction contrasted with the period of the run up to the March 2005 parliamentary election, when President Mugabe declared a policy of "zero tolerance" for political violence, during which members of both parties were arrested for such acts.

It was clear by its behavior that the government of Zimbabwe felt threatened, as it had reason to. Years of sanctions and Western meddling, coupled with an increasingly truculent opposition, had indeed menaced ZANU-PF's ability to govern the nation. Western

intervention followed well-established patterns. Soften the target nation with sanctions and cripple the economy. Blame the resulting economic disaster on government “economic mismanagement,” in order to build support for the opposition. Fund the opposition party and press, as well as anti-government NGO’s, to tilt the democratic process in a direction favorable to Western interests. If the opposition lacks sufficient support to come to power through democratic means, then encourage and sponsor “regime change” through mass action, as in Yugoslavia, Georgia and the Ukraine.

The West began to apply significant pressure on Zimbabwe late in 2001. In September of that year, the IMF declared Zimbabwe ineligible to use its general resources, and three months later President George W. Bush signed into law the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act of 2001. The law directed the U.S. Treasury Department to instruct U.S. members of international financial institutions to oppose and vote against any extension of any loan, credit or guarantee to Zimbabwe. The law also authorized President Bush to directly fund opposition media as well as “democracy and governance programs,” a euphemism for organizations opposed to the government. (7)

Western financial restrictions made it nearly impossible for Zimbabwe to engage in normal international trade. External balance of payments support was eliminated and nearly all external lines of credit were obstructed. “The current wave of declared and undeclared sanctions is negatively affecting the image of the country, thereby distorting how financial markets assess the risk profile of Zimbabwe,” pointed out Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe Governor Gideon Gono. “As a result, Zimbabwean companies are finding it extremely difficult to access offshore lines of credit because of the perceived country risk.” Zimbabwean companies are therefore compelled to deal “with their international suppliers strictly on a cash up front basis, with very minimal credit terms.” If companies are fortunate enough to secure external financing, it is generally only at very high interest rates. “A vicious circle has thus evolved since the imposition of sanctions on Zimbabwe. The resultant decline in economic activity emanating from the sanctions has given rise to rising external payment arrears, and high country risk, which in turn, has adverse effects on economic activity.” (8)

It was not only the U.S that was using its influence to hamper Zimbabwe’s economy. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw revealed that he was “building coalitions” against Zimbabwe, and he stated that Great Britain would “oppose any access by Zimbabwe to international financial institutions.” (9) British officials threatened to eliminate financial assistance to southern African nations unless they imposed sanctions on their neighbor. President Benjamin Mkapa complained that African Commonwealth members had “endured a bombardment for an alliance against Mugabe.” (10)

The World Bank and IMF played an important role in the economic sabotage of Zimbabwe’s economy, and sought to dissuade others from extending financial credit to Zimbabwe. According to one source in Zimbabwe, “Our contacts in various countries have indicated that these institutions are using all sorts of tactics to cow all those who are keen to assist Zimbabwe.” (11)

For a nation that had to import 100 percent of its oil, 40 percent of its electricity and most of its spare parts, Zimbabwe was highly vulnerable to being cut off from access to foreign exchange. Any modern economy must rely on international financial institutions in order to transact normal trade. But Western nations had largely disrupted Zimbabwe’s ability to do so, and the result was immediate and dire. The supply of oil fell sharply, and

periodically ran out entirely. It became increasingly difficult to muster the foreign currency to maintain an adequate level of imported electricity, and the nation was frequently beset by black outs. The shortage of oil and electricity in turn severely hobbled industrial production, as did the inability to import raw materials and spare parts. Business after business closed down and the unemployment rate soared above 70 percent. Inflation raged, driving incomes in real terms to a point so low that people struggled just to survive. (12)

U.S., British and Western European governments sought to exploit the resulting discontent by bankrolling the opposition MDC, supplying it with tens of millions of dollars. But passage of a law in Zimbabwe making it illegal for political parties to receive funding from abroad forced both the MDC and its Western backers to be more circumspect about their relationship. The West had reason to feel that it was not getting its money's worth, as the MDC's electoral performance was generally disappointing. Although the party could count on substantial support in urban areas, the more populous rural areas stood solidly behind the ZANU-PF government. There was little appeal for the rural population in the MDC's program, which called for near total privatization of state owned firms and government services and a return to neoliberal economic policy. The ZANU-PF government, on the other hand, had done away with the land ownership pattern inherited from apartheid Rhodesia, with its extreme concentration of land and wealth in the hands of a relatively few white commercial farmers. The MDC's adherence to neoliberal principles, on the other hand, posed the potential risk of a reversal of the land reform process, in whole or in part.

Left to its own merits, the MDC would have little prospect of coming to power through electoral means in the foreseeable future. The option of bringing down the government through non-democratic means therefore has considerable appeal for the opposition and Western governments. As early as 2000, MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai told a rally, "What we would like to tell Mugabe is please go peacefully. If you don't want to go peacefully, we will remove you violently." (13) The MDC has since that time periodically organized mass actions against the government, including one that Tsvangirai dubbed "the final push."

Tsvangirai had at one point even contacted a Montreal-based public relations firm led by a former Israeli intelligence official, believing that the company would have contacts with the CIA. Disturbed by Tsvangirai's requests, the firm taped their final two meetings. The first tape, in which Tsvangirai was more explicit, proved to be inaudible due to nearby construction work, but the public relations firm did warn the Zimbabwean government and the second tape was sent as evidence. Tsvangirai was more careful with his words at the second of the recorded meetings, and it was therefore not entirely clear whether he was seeking the assassination of President Mugabe, as the public relations firm claimed, or a coup d'etat. Tsvangirai talked of the "elimination" of President Mugabe, and worried that the army would take over instead of him in the ensuing "chaos." Tsvangirai went to trial on charges of treason over the case, but was found not guilty. The tapes were fairly incriminating but not specific enough, and the charge of treason carried the prospect of the death penalty. Furthermore the prosecution's case was not particularly well prepared. Despite all that, the most charitable view of the content of the tape was that at a minimum Tsvangirai planned to come to power through extra-legal means. (14)

The opposition eventually split over the issue of whether or not to even participate in the electoral process. The MDC was trounced in the last election, partly due to the Tsvangirai faction's decision to boycott the process and partly due to lukewarm public support for the party. Tsvangirai met with Western officials following the election, after which he announced

that the way forward for the opposition would be “an era of democratic mass confrontation with the dictatorship – an era of non-violent mass resistance.” (15) Power was to be seized through “mass confrontation,” which in reality would be neither democratic nor non-violent. Washington and London dreamed of another “color revolution,” such as the one that had overthrown the government in the Ukraine, and the installation in power of a compliant leader eager to take orders.

On January 9 of this year, both factions of the MDC met with U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe Christopher Dell, who urged them to unite. Soon thereafter, the MDC launched its “defiance campaign,” marked by a series of demonstrations and sporadic acts of violence, including the knifing of a police officer. By the time of the March 11 “prayer meeting,” the political atmosphere had become highly charged. (16) By relentlessly roiling the political waters, the U.S. and Great Britain had created an intensely contested political culture in Zimbabwe, and it was no secret that the aim was to topple the government. In such circumstances, political passions had reached the point where patience with the MDC and its efforts to bring down the government had worn thin.

Encouraged by the unreserved backing it was receiving in the West since the beatings at Machipisa station, the MDC stepped up its efforts. Arthur Mutambara announced that the MDC was “in the final stages of the final push,” and planned to continue with the defiance campaign. “We are talking about rebellion, war.” (17) This was followed by a flurry of violent acts. A police station in Harare was fire bombed, causing serious facial injuries to two policewomen. The demonstration at the funeral of the slain MDC demonstrator turned violent, and MDC supporters battled with police for several hours. A passenger train passing through a Harare suburb was fire bombed, causing five injuries, and the next day another police station, this time in Mutare, was the target of a gasoline bomb. By the end of a three-week period, the tenth target was bombed, a business owned by a former ZANU-PF member of Parliament. (18) The West’s high dudgeon over the issue of violence was nowhere to be seen and the incidents went without comment. After two gasoline tankers were bombed, a sweep by police nabbed 35 MDC suspects along with more than 50 explosives and two dozen detonators. It was said that the explosives were of the same type as those used against the passenger train. (19) Western media, silent on the wave of bombings, castigated the government of Zimbabwe for the arrests, and falsely asserted that Tsvangirai had been arrested in the sweep.

The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) called for a general strike to be held on April 3-4, and the MDC and its Western backers held high hopes that the strike would degenerate into such chaos that the nation would become ungovernable. Relations between the MDC and ZCTU are closely intertwined, and indeed it was the ZCTU that launched the MDC. Tsvangirai was at one time the leader of the trade union organization and in its early years, the MDC used the ZCTU’s offices and facilities. So cozy is the relationship that it is probable that the strike was in fact an MDC initiative. The opposition regarded the strike as part of its larger strategic plan. “You are going to see more of these actions coming,” warned MDC spokesman Nelson Chamisa. (20) Expectations, however, were to be disappointed when the strike fizzled as businesses continued to operate as normal.

Internal pressure on the government of Zimbabwe was combined with external threats. The U.S. and Great Britain were once again urging African nations to pressure Zimbabwe. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said that African nations should impose sanctions. Western leaders arrogantly lectured African leaders in a demeaning manner, trying to dictate to them how to act, and treated them as if they were mere servants to do

the West's bidding. When the Southern African Development Community (SADC) met to discuss regional matters, the subject of Zimbabwe was high on the agenda. Western political leaders and media did not hide their expectation that Zimbabwe's neighbors would choose the occasion to join the Western campaign.

Instead, the SADC issued a firm rebuff to the West. The statement issued by the organization pointed out that "free and fair democratic presidential elections were held in 2002 in Zimbabwe," and the SADC "reaffirmed its solidarity with the government and people of Zimbabwe." South African President Thabo Mbeki would work to facilitate dialogue between the government and the opposition. In a clear message to the Western powers, the SADC appealed to Great Britain to "honor its compensation obligations with regard to land reform," and called for "the lifting of all forms of sanctions against Zimbabwe." (21) Zimbabwe's neighbors knew that Western sanctions had inflicted severe harm on the economy and had in large part turned the political environment into a fight to the death that only encouraged violence. If what was wanted was a reduction in violence and political passions, then that could best be achieved by removing sanctions and allowing the economy to recover.

U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe Christopher Dell spurned the appeal a few days later by saying that the U.S. would not lift sanctions against Zimbabwe. "It's simply not going to happen." (22) The U.S. and Great Britain liked to point to the targeted sanctions against selected officials in Zimbabwe, which consisted of restrictions on travel and financial transactions abroad, claiming that such sanctions could not affect the economy of the entire nation. That claim was disingenuous, leaving out as it did the substantial efforts to block Zimbabwe's access to foreign currency and international trade. "They use the term targeted sanctions," observed Zimbabwean information minister Sikhanyiso Ndlovu, "yet any company that deals with Zimbabwe - they have been threatened; ordered not to deal with Zimbabwe. External financial institutions and banks have been told not to deal with Zimbabwe...so that the country does not have foreign currency. These targeted sanctions are a smoke screen." (23)

Further measures are in the works. In addition to current sanctions, U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said, "it's really a matter of looking at what else we might do with the international community, and part of that effort is to work with states in the region to get them to increase the pressure" on Zimbabwe. (24) This was confirmed by U.S. State Department deputy spokesman Tom Casey when he said, "There's always other tools in the toolbox, though, and I certainly expect we'll look at those." (25)

The Western destabilization campaign coupled interference in the internal affairs of Zimbabwe with sanctions. In addition to aid and advice to the MDC, funding is provided to media and NGO's in support of the opposition. Due to the illegality under Zimbabwean law of many of their actions, the U.S. and Great Britain have generally avoided spelling out too many specifics. But the aim is clear, as indicated by the U.S. State Department: the strategy is "to maintain pressure on the Mugabe regime" and "to strengthen democratic forces," that is, the MDC. The campaign against Zimbabwe is international in scope, and "the United States emphasized international cooperation and coordination. U.S. officials engaged multilaterally and bilaterally to expand international support of sanctions against government and ruling officials." The U.S. also sponsors "public events" inside Zimbabwe, which are intended to "discredit" the government's claim that sanctions are harming the economy, and to shift blame for economic decline onto the government. The U.S. provides what it vaguely refers to as "support" to the political opposition, and which in fact is quite

extensive. (26)

Training has been provided to some opposition members of Parliament, as well as to “selected democratically oriented organizations.” The United States also directly funds “a number of civil society organizations” (NGO’s) and provides them “with training and technical assistance to help them advocate to the parliament on issues of national significance.” In other words, so-called civil society organizations are being paid and trained to influence legislation in an amenable manner for Western interests. Opposition media are generously funded in order to “fortify” their efforts to swing public support to the opposition. Nearly a third of a million dollars was given to the U.S. Solidarity Center to establish a program “to assist trade unions in Zimbabwe to become more accountable and responsive to their members.” (27) It would be more accurate to say that the intent was to encourage trade unions to become “more accountable and responsive” to Western interests. Affiliated with the AFL-CIO, Solidarity Center receives funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. State Department, and it often acts as an extension of U.S. foreign policy. (28) Among the myriad organizations involved in Zimbabwe on behalf of U.S. interests are Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the National Republican Institute, and a host of others.

The interventionist liberal-left in the West has jumped on the bandwagon of support for Bush and Blair’s campaign to topple the government of Zimbabwe. But critics who call for a Western-imposed “transition process” in Zimbabwe forget that the nation already has a transition process — an election which is scheduled for next year. No amount of imperial posturing can change the fact that it is only the people of Zimbabwe that have the right to choose their government — not the U.S. and Great Britain. The Zimbabwean people made their choice in the last presidential and parliamentary elections, both of which were deemed free and fair by African observers on the ground. Predictably, the U.S. and Great Britain, having no election observers, condemned the elections from afar as fraudulent even before they took place in a blatant attempt to discredit election outcomes that every poll had foretold. Western condemnation was prompted by the uncomfortable realization that a different outcome could not be imposed, no matter how many tens of millions of dollars were pumped into the coffers of the opposition.

If the Western-funded MDC has been incapable of coming up with a program that would appeal to a majority of voters, it is because the party has preferred to focus its attention on policies that would benefit Western corporate interests. For the Western liberal-left to call for the U.S. to “mediate” in a transition process is nothing less than a demand for U.S. meddling to initiate a coup to remove the legally elected government of Zimbabwe. There is something unseemly in the attitude that the U.S. and Great Britain have the right to dictate the fate of other nations and to determine who shall hold power, and that it is the duty of activists to support imperial domination.

If the police in Zimbabwe have acted harshly at times, it is because Western interference has created a life or death struggle for survival in Zimbabwe. That the U.S. and Great Britain are using every means possible to effect regime change and to encourage the opposition to bring down the government through mass action can only have resulted in a deeply polarized society. The government of Zimbabwe is cognizant of previous Western-backed campaigns that successfully removed the governments of Yugoslavia, Georgia and the Ukraine and installed compliant puppets in their place. Zimbabwe is vigilant against Western attempts to incite opposition supporters to bring about a violent change of

government.

It is dismaying that so many would call for U.S. and British intervention in the affairs of a sovereign nation. It was British colonialism that stole the land from the African people and introduced the horrors of the apartheid system in Rhodesia. Over the decades of colonial rule, the British government expropriated untold billions of dollars from the land, labor and resources while depopulating the rich farmland regions and herding those expelled from their homes into the most barren areas. Is it not ironic that the U.S. and Great Britain condemn government violence in Zimbabwe when they have done so much to create the circumstances that almost guarantee such an outcome? Is it not relevant that the West has fostered myriad acts of violence by the opposition? And what could be stranger than for the U.S. and Great Britain to act as self-appointed moral authorities on the subject of violence and democracy as they crush Iraq and Afghanistan under the boot of occupation? Whatever acts of violence may have taken place in Zimbabwe pale in comparison to the vast numbers of victims of Western firepower in Iraq. If the U.S. and Great Britain are as committed to peace, democracy and the rule of law as they claim to be, then let them leave Iraq now, without delay.

Western liberal-left critics demand more meddling by the U.S. and Great Britain in the affairs of Zimbabwe, under the delusion that Western-imposed regime change would be a “democratic” act. It is only corporate and elite interests that would be served, for Zimbabwe’s crime in the eyes of Washington is that it jettisoned the ruinous structural adjustment program several years ago, rejected the neoliberal economic model and redistributed land on a more equitable basis. It is not lack of democracy in Zimbabwe that worries Western elites; it is the fact that democracy has produced a government that those in the halls of power in Washington and London wish to remove. What the West wants is to overturn democracy in Zimbabwe and impose a government of its choosing. Zimbabwe, to its credit, has refused to bend to intense pressure and remains committed to the course it has charted, in which the economy is geared to the interests of its own people, not that of Western corporate interests.

“Zimbabwe is a strategic country for the United States because events in Zimbabwe have a significant impact on the entire region,” points out USAID. (29) Indeed, President Mugabe says that the struggle Zimbabwe has embarked upon is nothing less than Africa’s second liberation. The continent, having freed itself from direct colonial rule, has yet to free itself of economic domination. In Namibia and South Africa, the formal end of apartheid rule has done nothing to undo the concentration of land in the hands of the wealthy white few, while millions of black peasants remain without land. Throughout Africa, the neoliberal economic model has crippled prospects for development. Zimbabwe’s example, were it allowed to flourish unhindered, might threaten to set an example that would make an indelible continent-wide impression. Conversely, the U.S. and Great Britain hope that a defeated Zimbabwe would send a signal that resistance to Western economic domination is futile. There is much that rides on the outcome of Zimbabwe’s struggle against its imperial enemies — perhaps the fate of Africa itself.

Gregory Elich is the author of *Strange Liberators: Militarism, Mayhem, and the Pursuit of Profit*

<http://www.amazon.com/Strange-Liberators-Militarism-Mayhem-Pursuit/dp/1595265708>

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