

Zimbabwe: Voting for Progress

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Zimbabwe's upcoming elections, scheduled to take place on July 31st, will go a long way to determining the future of the country. On the one hand, the entrenched power of President Mugabe and ZANU-PF enters the elections with a track record that both elicits praise and inspires criticism. On the other hand, there is Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and his opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) which enters the election once again with the high-minded rhetoric of "democracy" and "transparency", but also with a mixed record that has many questioning their ability to lead.

With less than two weeks to go before Zimbabweans go to the polls many questions remain unanswered: Will the MDC-T boycott the elections due to what they perceive to be a lack of reforms? Will Zimbabwe be able to carry out peaceful elections, unlike in 2008? Are the people of Zimbabwe satisfied with the progress of land redistribution and other reforms implemented by Mugabe and ZANU-PF? These are only some of the most pressing questions weighing on the minds of urban and rural Zimbabweans alike.

Elections: An Economic Referendum

Since the creation of the ZANU-PF/MDC-T inclusive government after the election in 2008, there has been a marked change in Zimbabwean politics. No longer is ZANU-PF the sole party in power and, consequently, the sole party responsible for positive and negative policy outcomes. Rather, both parties' respective leaders enter this year's elections as incumbents, and both must face scrutiny over their policies and their actions.

President Mugabe and ZANU-PF have a difficult fight ahead of them. Despite outside factors such as sanctions imposed by the US and UK, many Zimbabweans hold Mugabe and ZANU-PF responsible for the economic difficulties of the recent past including record inflation which led to the collapse of the currency and its [abolition](#) in favor of the US dollar. [The African Development Bank's Economic Outlook for Zimbabwe](#), published in 2011, notes that, "Inflation is projected to rise to 6.5% in 2012 and 6.7% in 2013. Inflationary developments in the short to medium term will continue to be influenced by the US dollar/rand exchange rate, inflation developments in South Africa, international oil prices, and local utility charges." [i] By adopting the US dollar, Zimbabwe managed to resolve the crippling plague of inflation, though at the cost of any semblance of monetary sovereignty.

Unemployment continues to be one of the principal concerns, particularly among young people, many of whom fear that any hope for the future is little more than idle daydreaming. According to the [Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe](#), the unemployment rate as measured in January 2012 was 10.7%. However, it must be noted that these numbers, like unemployment rates in the United States, are likely to be a gross underestimation as they only consider those actively searching for work as a percentage of the labor force.

Essentially then, the many Zimbabweans who are officially unemployed but not “actively looking for work” disappear in these statistics.

According to the [CIA World Fact Book](#), as well as a number of international NGOs, Zimbabwe’s true unemployment rate is one of the highest in the world, with estimates ranging from 50% to as high as 95%. However, these too are likely to be distorted numbers which do not take into account the informal economy and the many forms of economic activity that do not have a place in the official statistics. Moreover, such inflated data is rooted in the West’s ideological and political desire to demonize ZANU-PF and foment political upheaval. As Zimbabwe’s MDC-T Finance Minister Tendai Biti [explained](#) in June 2013:

We have always had this argument about what is the percentage of people that are employed or unemployed in Zimbabwe. Textbook economists will say 85 percent but that is not true. If we had a population like that, most people in Zimbabwe would have died, it is not possible...One is either a farmer, selling juice cards, driving an emergency taxi, or working as a hair dresser. The fact of the matter is most people are economically active.[ii]

Biti’s point is a valid one. To simply claim that all those people employed in the informal economy are somehow unemployed is pure dishonesty. However, the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe’s unemployment figure of less than 11% is also an exercise in spin. The true unemployment is somewhere between these two extremes. However, no matter the actual figure, unemployment continues to be one of the most pressing issues on the minds of Zimbabweans.

Unlike inflation and unemployment – problems faced by all countries regardless of development – there are two particular economic programs which are specific to Zimbabwe and have a tremendous impact on the lives of its citizens: Land redistribution and “indigenization”. The common thread linking these two programs is the creation of a self-sufficient and economically independent nation.

An inescapable outcome of European colonial control and imperialism has been the dispossession of black Africans. By the end of the liberation struggle, the vast majority of arable land was in the hands of white farmers while the black population worked the land in the service of the European landowners. However, by 2000, Mugabe and ZANU-PF began the “fast track” land program. The results of this program are discussed in the new book *Zimbabwe Takes Back Its Land*. The authors explain:

In the biggest land reform in Africa, 6,000 white farmers have been replaced by 245,000 Zimbabwean farmers. These are primarily ordinary poor people who have become more productive farmers. The change was inevitably disruptive at first, but production is increasing rapidly. Agricultural production is now returning to the 1990s level, and resettled farmers already grow 40% of the country’s tobacco and 49% of its maize.[iii]

It should be acknowledged that the actual distribution of this land was not without problems

and corruption, as some of the best land was seized by force and through cronyism. However, despite this corruption (a droning talking point in the mainstream media in the West who attempt to demonize Mugabe at every turn), the results of the program are undeniable: Africa's greatest land redistribution program has created a new class of farmers forming the backbone of Zimbabwe's agricultural output, and its economy.

Like the land reforms implemented by Mugabe and ZANU-PF, the "indigenization" program is also designed to increase self-sufficiency and independence from foreign control. The indigenization program altered the laws of the country in regards to ownership, mandating that enterprises deemed in the national interest should be majority owned by Zimbabweans, not foreign investors, be they white or black. Though the program was initially mocked, and continues to be met with derision by capitalists the world over, it has proven to be successful, at least in the early stages. The indigenization program also is intended to address unemployment, and specifically youth unemployment which continues to be a major problem.

These economic issues are fundamental to the daily lives of regular Zimbabweans. As such, they will undoubtedly be the issues that impact, more than anything else, how Zimbabwe votes. However, although economics is on the minds of everyone, politics have shaped the debate. Unlike in 2008, when Morgan Tsvangirai and the MDC-T were merely the opposition with no political power, this time around they have to defend their record on all of the economic policies and more. Likewise, ZANU-PF has a number of significant political questions to address as it tries to convince Zimbabweans to continue their commitment and support for Mugabe and the revolution.

The Politics of Progress

Both major parties in Zimbabwe are attempting to present themselves as reformers interested in progressive change that will improve the lives of working people and the poor. However, ZANU-PF and MDC-T employ very different strategies - policy, rhetoric, ideology, etc. - in order to achieve substantive positive change. While Mugabe and ZANU-PF tout their tremendous achievements with land redistribution, indigenization and nationalization, and other nationalistic policies, Tsvangirai and the MDC-T rely on the more abstract concepts of democracy, transparency and anti-corruption, and integration with the world economy, specifically with the Western powers. These radically different approaches present Zimbabweans with a very important choice in these elections.

Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai has long since been correctly understood to be the favored choice of the US and UK. His MDC-T has advocated tirelessly for economic policies that are geared towards international economic integration, while blasting all economic policies put forward by ZANU-PF. Additionally, many Zimbabweans have begun asking precisely what role the MDC-T has played in the economic assault on the country through sanctions. In an [op-ed piece](#) in the New Zimbabwe, Tobaiwa Tigere states, "A key reason why ZDERA [Zimbabwe Democracy and Recovery Act] was passed was to enable to US Secretary of the Treasury to transfer funds from the US to Zimbabwe to 'aid democratic forces in that country'...some estimates put the dollar value of resources transferred to the MDC-T since ZDERA was enacted at well over \$250 million." [iv] Additionally, one should also recall the [WikiLeaks](#) documents which "Showed that he [Tsvangirai] had been privately urging Washington to maintain sanctions against Harare, while taking the opposite position in public." [v] Such facts raise doubts in the minds of many Zimbabweans who are understandably dissatisfied due to poverty and unemployment, but who likewise understand

that an MDC-T victory is a victory for Washington, London and Wall St.

Naturally, the amount of overt and covert support the MDC-T has received from the US and other Western powers has caused many to wonder what exactly is on the agenda of the MDC-T and its backers. The question of regime change, the favorite tactic of western imperialism in the 21st Century, is very much out in the open. In fact, President Mugabe addressed this very point in a [recent interview](#). Speaking about the need for these elections, Mugabe stated:

We had to demonstrate to the West that it's not you who should instruct us to stand down, ha, regime change does not work. Who are you to want our regime to change?...But we said no, we fought them yesterday you see, we can fight them again. We won't collapse and we didn't collapse, we will remain and remain with the leadership they don't want...We're defiant...But we will settle down and naturally we should allow power to transfer. But we must be assured that when we transfer that we are well united and we have built-in strength within the party.[vi]

Here, one can see clearly the juxtaposition that is at the heart of these elections: Mugabe and ZANU-PF's defiance of the western powers and their neocolonial agenda, and Tsvangirai and MDC-T's embrace of the neoliberal capitalist ideology as evidenced by their inextricable link to Western finance and intelligence.

Tsvangirai and the MDC-T have stated repeatedly that, despite taking part in the elections, they are not convinced of their fairness. They have publicly proclaimed that, without the necessary reforms taking place (media, security, and electoral reforms), the election will be irrelevant. Deputy Prime Minister and MDC Vice President Thokazani Kupe explained in a [recent interview](#) that, "As the MDC we are prepared for election anytime but as long as all these [reforms] are done before July 31 we don't have any problems. But there is no way we can [stand] for an election without these things being done, it will be a waste of time." [vii] Such comments merit closer analysis. On the one hand, it seems that MDC makes an important point that, in order to have truly fair elections, the playing field must be leveled. However, seen from another perspective, this is a cynical ploy utilized by the MDC in order to protect itself against electoral defeat. By establishing the elections as "fair" only if the conditions laid out by MDC are met, Tsvangirai's party effectively invalidates the election *prima facie* or, to put it another way, the MDC invalidates the elections...unless they win.

The MDC has built its reputation criticizing ZANU-PF and Mugabe. The party has managed to win over millions of Zimbabweans who, out of economic desperation, are willing to listen to anyone offering the hope of a better future. However, when examined from a purely policy perspective, it becomes clear that MDC and Prime Minister Tsvangirai have many questions to answer. First and foremost, the opposition has to explain to working people why it is that the MDC-T has always sided with the financiers and neoliberals: they opposed Mugabe's land programs, opposed the indigenization program, opposed the mine nationalization program, and much more. Although these programs were not without their faults, taken as a whole, they have proven to be successful and have been supported by the people. Many Zimbabweans wonder why Tsvangirai always seems to side with the US and

the British speculators and financiers. They are right to wonder.

The rhetoric employed by Tsvangirai and the MDC is critical. They call for “reform”, “change”, “transparency” and many other buzz words of modern democracy. However, the real question before Zimbabweans is, to what extent are these slogans merely the window-dressing for opening up the country to vulture capitalists and speculators who will be able to profit off of Zimbabwe’s resources without sharing the profits with the people? In this way, MDC-T has a very serious image problem: they are seen as puppets of the West. Not only does this have implications for the economic future of the people and the country, but its political future as well.

The United States has spent the last few years building its military capacity all throughout the African continent. The establishment and expansion of US Africa Command (AFRICOM) has entrenched US military “advisors” throughout the militaries of the continent, while drone bases like those in Djibouti and Niger greatly expand US military capacity on the continent. Additionally, considering their domination of the African Union, ECOWAS, and other regional groupings, the United States has cemented a dominant position in Africa. Yet, despite all the difficulties, Zimbabwe remains untouched by US imperial presence. How long will such a status quo last if Tsvangirai and MDC claim power?

As Election Day approaches, all of the most pressing issues facing Zimbabweans will come to the fore. It is against the tumultuous political and economic backdrop of life in that country that the people will make their voices heard. However, the elections are more than simply a choice between two political formations. Rather, the elections represent the continuation of the revolution and the liberation struggle. The heroes who died for Zimbabwe made the ultimate sacrifice so that the people would be able to determine their own future, not white European capitalists. It is upon the ground where they shed their blood for the people, that the people will cast their votes and decide their future.

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Notes

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[i] <http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Zimbabwe%20Full%20PDF%20Country%20Note.pdf>

[ii] <http://bulawayo24.com/index-id-business-sc-economy-byo-31337.html>

[iii]

<http://africanarguments.org/2013/03/21/zimbabwe-takes-back-its-land-%E2%80%93-a-review-by-martin-plaut/>

[iv]

<http://www.newzimbabwe.com/opinion-10676-Tsvangirai+cloud+that+doesnt+bear+water/opinion.aspx>

[v]

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/help/insideguardian/2011/jan/13/wikileaks-morgan-tsvangirai-inside-guardian?intcmp=239>

[vi] <http://www.news24.com/Africa/Zimbabwe/Tsvangirai-an-ignorant-man-Mugabe-20130628>

[vii] <http://allafrica.com/stories/201306271188.html?viewall=1>

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