

**Between Authoritarianism and Democratization: The Challenges
of a Transition Process in Zimbabwe**

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Lloyd Sachikonye, *Between Authoritarianism and Democratization: The Challenges of a Transition Process in Zimbabwe*

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Background¹

In February 2009, the Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe turned 85. He looked forward to celebrating it in a provincial town (Chinhoyi) close to his birth-place of Zvimba. Like during the previous 20 birthdays or so, the *21st February Youth Movement* was the main organizer together with his 45-year old party, Zanu PF. The *21st February Movement* has the attributes of a personality cult; the extolling of virtues of heroism, leadership and selflessness for a month filled the public media which is largely controlled by the state.

The Zimbabwean leader has been at the helm of the State ever since it attained Independence from the British in 1980. He is one of the longest serving Heads of State in Africa (after Muammar Gaddafi and Omar Bongo, and he is probably a contemporary of Hosni Mubarak). In Southern Africa, he is certainly the longest serving president, a position he holds with his stature of liberation war hero. Robert Mugabe's persona and status are now tightly woven into the history, fortunes and misfortunes of Zimbabwe. He is a "love-hate" figure, viewed in some quarters as a personification of much of all what is wrong about Africa, an ambitious and ruthless figure who clings to power at all cost, despite the enormous damage done to the fabric of his society. In other quarters, he is an African hero, defiant to the last against imperialism, against neo-colonialism, against international double-standards and hypocrisy (Raftopoulos, Phimister 2003).

For our present purposes, Robert Mugabe is the personification of what we term authoritarianism in contemporary Zimbabwe. This is a political and social system and structure that has suppressed growth of democracy, preservation of the rule of law, development of checks and balances on state institutions and protection of civil liberties (Sachikonye 2002, 2003; Sachikonye, Matombo 2009). After a decade of euphoria and growth, the Zimbabwean leader began to turn the clock backwards precisely when the Cold War was ending, and much of Africa was installing multi-party democracy after sending the military back to the barracks. Instead of pursuing inclusive constitutional reform in the late 1990s, he mobilized war veterans to be the vanguard of land reform and violent election campaigns in 2000 and 2002. Authoritarian practices intensified from 2000 onwards triggering international revulsion including targeted sanctions by the European Union of which Italy is a member.

However, it would be simplistic and superficial to explain Zimbabwe's descent into authoritarian dictatorship on the decisions and actions of the leader alone. There is need to understand the full dimensions of the system that was constructed in the post-1980 period. Part of the system includes what is known as "Office of the President". The tentacles of this vast Office extend from the Cabinet Office to uniformed services, from ministries, to provinces and districts, from embassies,

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college campuses to villages. One informal estimate was that one out every five Zimbabweans had some connection with the Office. It is a pervasive institution. The “Office of the President” draws a considerable budget every year but by law that budget cannot be scrutinised closely. The “Office” is the ears and eyes of the President and an indispensable foundation stone of Robert Mugabe’s power. In addition, he has vast powers and resources in dispensing patronage from ministerial appointments, to those of Governors, some of the Senators and most Ambassadors and Commissioners. Robert Mugabe also runs a Presidential Scholarship Fund under which several hundred young Zimbabweans are trained in South African universities.

Authoritarianism can have a benign face in the form of patronage. But it also has a coercive face. Here authoritarianism relates to a form of arbitrary government which uses coercive instruments of the State to monopolise power while denying political rights and opportunities to other groups to compete for that power. It also seeks to repress civil society organizations (CSOs) and other autonomous groups in society which could potentially become sources of challenge to undemocratic practices in the state. It is scarcely surprising that authoritarian regimes concentrate their energies in emasculating labour unions, student organizations, human rights groups, the independent press and the judiciary. Such regimes resist attempts at “democratization from below”, including those aimed at broad constitutional reform.

Authoritarianism in the Wider Context

There are a variety of forces and institutions that have moulded the authoritarian system into its current form. Key institutions such as Parliament and the Judiciary experienced a devaluation of their powers and autonomy during the period from 2000 to 2008 (Hammar, Raftopoulos, Jensen 2003; Harold-Barry 2004). Stuffed with presidential appointees who included traditional chiefs, Parliament essentially played a “rubber-stamping” role. The public service itself recruited on the basis of political criteria; Zanu PF membership was often *sine qua non* for postings as well as for promotion. In the post-2000, there were purges of public servants whose loyalty to Zanu PF was doubtful.

There was extensive control over the media with the introduction of repressive laws such as Access to Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) in 2002. State control over radio and television was monopolized by the then ruling Zanu PF. Some elements within the state took tougher measures against independent media that was critical towards the state. Their press offices were bombed (as in the case of the *Daily News*), the offices of an independent radio were also bombed (as happened to *Radio Voice of the People*) while scores have been detained and others tortured (Nyarota 2005). Political meetings such as rallies have been consistently repressed through legislation such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA). There have been plans to repress NGOs engaged in

governance and human rights work. This explained the introduction of an NGO Bill in 2004 which has had a deterrent effect even though it has not been formalized into law.

The restriction of political space was accompanied, indeed bolstered, by the ascendancy of the military-security establishment within the state. This establishment also known as the securo-crats became more prominent especially from 2000 onwards in the violence linked to land occupations and during the parliamentary election of 2000, and the presidential election of 2002. The rise of this establishment was also described as “militarization” of politics and state institutions. The commanders of army, air force, police, intelligence and prisons constituted a Joint Operations Command (JOC), a body that became prominent in political and election strategies in the post-2000 period. The President used it as his power base but the JOC also exploited this new situation to become a rival to the Cabinet as a seat of power and source of policy. The story was told that when Robert Mugabe lost in the first round of the presidential election in March 2008, it was this JOC that encouraged him to stay on while they crafted a re-election strategy based on well-planned tactics of widespread intimidation and violence to reverse the March defeat. It is also this JOC that has been least enthusiastic about the Power-sharing Agreement signed in September 2008 (*Zimbabwean on Sunday*, 1 March 2009).

However, whatever the future might bring, the one legacy that will survive is the National Security Council in which the JOC was a dominant force. Its membership has now been widened to include leaders of the former Opposition parties, and the influence of the ‘Generals’ has been diluted as a consequence. But it is significant that in recent years it is this National Security Council together with the JOC that have constituted the inner core of the state and the major base of Mugabe in a context of an ineffective Cabinet and faction-ridden party. In sum, as authoritarianism has deepened, so has the power and influence of the military-security nexus, and Mugabe has become beholden to them, almost as an hostage. This raises great challenges for reform and transition. If the military-security nexus bore responsibility for repression including violence, how will their actions and impunity be addressed in the new era? How will transitional justice issues be addressed by the power-sharing government? There is still no clarity on these questions.

Pressures for Democratic Change

Authoritarianism would not be permanently hegemonic. Even prior to 2000, it was being challenged from various quarters. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) such as trade unions, student organizations, human rights groups and the independent media were in the forefront of challenging the hegemony represented by Zanu PF and the authoritarian state. Pressure groups were influential in raising the constitutional agenda. The Zimbabwean CSOs grew in skills and sophistication. Before the economic crisis worsened in the mid-2000s and migration of professionals increased,

they were amongst the better organized and resilient CSOs.

Another source of pressure on the authoritarian regime was coming from the regional and international communities. Labour confederations such as COSATU in South Africa and human rights organizations like Ditshwanelo in Botswana played an important role in regional solidarity for democratic change in Zimbabwe. Regional state organizations such as SADC, and continental ones like AU and EU, and global ones like the UN, all played a role at different levels to persuade the Mugabe government that the authoritarian path, no matter how much rooted it was in anti-imperialism and pan-Africanism, was mistaken and ultimately unsustainable.

By the beginning of 2007, it was clear that the Zimbabwean State had run out of any viable strategy. The economy was collapsing. Naked violence and the accompanying images broadcast around the world in March 2007 shocked both African and world opinion. Neither SADC nor AU could continue to turn their faces the other way. This was the immediate context in which Thabo Mbeki, then South Africa's President, was appointed SADC Mediator. Between early 2007 and the end of that year, negotiations for a political settlement dragged on interminably. There was little faith in those negotiations on his part as long as Mugabe held most overwhelming power. But this changed profoundly in March 2008 with the outcome of the elections. His party lost control of Parliament in favour of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) factions under Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara respectively. In effect, it was the expression of the people's will through that election that changed the face of Zimbabwean politics. Although the MDC parliamentary victory was not a landslide, it was sufficient to constitute a major watershed in Zimbabwean politics. Together with Tsvangirai's first round win, these developments ensured that "things would never be the same again" in Zimbabwean politics.

We will not delve into the protracted negotiations for what was variously termed "Power-sharing" Government, "Inclusive Government", transitional "Government of National Unity". They dragged on between July and mid-September 2008 when an Agreement was eventually signed (Zimbabwe Government 2008). But it would take another 4 months before the 'Power sharing' government itself was installed. The four months had been consumed in tortuous haggling over which party should run which ministry! These protracted negotiations gave a strong impression that the three parties were more interested in the spoils of power than in the welfare of citizens. This observation had huge resonance in the context of a deepening humanitarian crisis and a cholera epidemic.

It emerged in February 2009 that the compromise reached between the three political players involved an unprecedented large Cabinet and government. There were appointed 70 ministers, deputy ministers and governors! This looked more like an élite pact driven by a strong spoil-system attitude than a coherent programme for recovery for a crisis-ridden country. There are major issues that this transitional government should address in the next two years. They include stabilization of

the economy and constitutional reform as well transitional justice issues. Whether it will rise to these tasks remains an open question. Whether Robert Mugabe and his party are committed to reform is also a large question. The country is at a crossroads at the beginning of 2009.

Towards a Transition?

The large question (or 64 thousand dollars question as some would put it) is whether current developments will lead to a transition. On the face of it, the Inclusive Coalition Government is already a transitional administration before a new Constitution is approved and fresh elections are held in two years' time. But a transition should not just be political in the form of a transfer of power from one political party to another. It needs to be a *substantive transition* from the present authoritarian system to a democratic system. To that extent, the question or agenda of a substantive qualitative transition applies to most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Is it a transition that goes beyond elections? Is the wider political culture undergoing transformation so that democratic values infuse political practice and state administration?

First, in our view, democratization is a protracted process that goes beyond a single or several generations. It is a complex process. By its very nature, the process of democratization is always a "work in progress" as no society could honestly claim to be 'completely democratized'! It is no accident that it is after 50 years of Independence that Ghana can provide a reasonably good model of how elections could be managed under stressful conditions. It is also why democratization can still take a variety of particular forms: for instance such as in dominant-party systems (as in Botswana, South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania and Mozambique) where the same party has been in power for up to 40 years! While the genuine-ness of such democracy can be questioned, it is the prerogative of an electorate recall back into office whoever it chooses.

Second, although conditions could conceivably have worsened without them, the Coalition Governments in Zimbabwe and Kenya are a flawed model. They represent a messy compromise where a ruling party loses at elections but is reluctant to leave office. It is to be hoped that this flawed model would not be replicated where you have closely fought elections somewhere in Africa in the future. Political classes and ruling parties should respect democratic values as well as the letter and spirit of the Constitution and electoral laws.

Third, the Zimbabwean political scenario draws attention to the comparative significance of urban and rural voting patterns, and the emerging importance of working class and middle class voters. The gains by the MDC in the 2008 election became possible when its appeal to rural voters grew in a context of economic hardships including food shortages. Rural voters had previously been beholden to the extensive patronage networks of Zanu PF. The working and middle classes showed that they can now play a decisive role in changing electoral outcomes. In the future, where it is

accepted, the Diaspora vote could also become quite significant.

Fourth, the Zimbabwe case throws into sharp relief the challenge of extending democratization in conditions of economic stagnation or decline as well as widespread poverty. While economic hardships, including hyper-inflation of 231 million per cent, can turn an electorate against a failed government, it is not automatic that conditions of democratization can be consolidated in such an environment. There could emerge new forms of accumulation, corruption, patronage, dependency and stagnation especially if no recovery occurs. This raises the issue of the role of the regional and international community in such a situation where a democratizing fragile State seeks short and medium support in form of grants and loans. Should the international community sit on the fence to judge whether or not the new government has consolidated its position in a democratic direction? Should it not shape the stabilization and consolidation process?

Fifth, the Zimbabwe case also raises the possibility that an elite pact in the form of the Inclusive Coalition Government might not necessarily lead to the strengthening of democracy. The pact could be confined to a mutual sharing of power within the political class without increasing citizen participation, protection of rights, and promoting accountability and transparency. Populism and patronage could continue to be manipulated to draw support from the population. In such a situation, there would be no qualitative growth in democratic institutions, practices and values.

Sixth, Zimbabwe is emerging from a decade of turmoil in which state-sanctioned violence created victims and perpetrators amongst various strata of society. This violence affected farmers, farm workers, opposition parties, civil society activists including unionists, students, youth and women. The issue of transitional justice therefore features highly in the Political Agreement between the Coalition Government partners. There have been compelling calls for the setting up of a Justice and Reconciliation Commission along the lines of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). But the concept of such a Commission needs further development and refinement in the Zimbabwean context. What should be its specific objectives? What form should the Commission take and what mechanisms should it adopt in order to be effective? If it should avoid being a superficial body with little credibility, these questions should be addressed frankly. If it is indeed set up, it might need to conduct its work beyond the two years that the Coalition Government would be in power.

Finally, there is a possible scenario that is sometimes termed WHAM (standing for “What happens after Mugabe?”). I remember talking about this scenario in a seminar in Munich in Germany in 2003! The Zimbabwean strongman describes himself as a strong young man at 58 not 85! By the time the Coalition Government runs its course, he could be 87. The question most pundits are asking is whether he would stand for office again after more than 30 years in power. Mugabe is an authoritarian who believes he has a special mission and a particular historical legacy to protect

(Holland 2008). It would not be too surprising if he would choose to contest another election. However, the consequences for his party could be more damaging than in the 2008 election. Or would he retire to his ostentatious villa in Harare or to his farm? The fate of the young nation together with its fragile democracy and economy would, once again, depend on the decision of this old-style African leader, hero to some, and dictator to others.

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