

COMMENTARY

The Close of the Mugabe Era

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After 28 years of increasingly violent misrule, the reign of Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe has entered its endgame. Frustrated by his failure to secure victory in the March 29 parliamentary and presidential elections, Mugabe has turned loose his security forces, ruling party militias, “war veterans,” and youth gangs to terrorize populations suspected of sympathizing with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Reports of violent assaults and killings are proliferating. As in Burma in September 2007, resort to repression has raised the specter of both a spasm of state violence against civilians and the consolidation of security chiefs’ power, organized under the Joint Operations Command. It has undermined already slim hopes that a runoff presidential election could be a free and fair contest.

The “crackdown” option has been effective in the past for Mugabe, but this time he will not easily reverse gathering momentum for his removal. Fractures have appeared in the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union—Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party and among Zimbabwe’s security chiefs. Mugabe’s conspicuous failure to successfully rig the election, something he has done routinely this decade, has damaged his position among ZANU-PF hardline stalwarts and exposed his vulnerability to a citizenry that has crossed a threshold of anger and economic desperation. A determined political opposition and brave civil society refuse to give up, despite escalating threats and unrelenting official violence. The parliamentary vote recount reaffirmed that the MDC won control of that body.

Among his regional neighbors, Mugabe is at long last losing the essential insulation provided him this past decade by the leadership of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

To Mugabe’s dismay, new Botswana president Ian Khama insisted that Zimbabwe’s opposition leader be present at the SADC extraordinary summit in mid-April. Zambian president Levy Mwanawasa, the current chair of SADC, has publicly criticized Mugabe’s refusal to disclose electoral outcomes. Multiple southern African states, including Angola, have refused to allow the transit of Chinese weapons destined for Zimbabwe. In an overt rebuke to South African president Thabo Mbeki, African National Congress (ANC) president Jacob Zuma opened a direct dialogue with the Zimbabwe opposition and while on tour to Berlin, Paris, and London signaled his openness to new solutions that look beyond Mbeki’s dismal mediation of the crisis in the past year.

At the same time, international condemnation of Mugabe and impatience with his southern African neighbors are rising. UK prime minister Gordon Brown has called for an international arms embargo. France, which assumes the EU presidency in June, has signaled its discomfort with the region’s confusion and disarray on Zimbabwe. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has condemned the “abomination” and “disgrace” of the Mugabe regime and dispatched Assistant Secretary of State Jendayi Frazer to the region, where she declared that the opposition had won the March 29 presidential elections, indicated that it is time for Mugabe to quit, and threatened to take the Zimbabwe crisis to the UN Security Council if matters continue to worsen. UN secretary-general Ban Ki Moon hosted opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai’s dialogue in Accra with west African leaders.

At least temporarily, Mugabe may yet escape the net that is closing around him. He has done so in the past and may endure for awhile through: further militarizing the government; intensifying repression; sending another convulsive exodus of Zimbabwe’s citizens into neighboring states; sustaining financial lifelines from Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and perhaps others states like Libya and China; and continuing to enjoy earnings from the platinum sector and virtually free power from South Africa. He may make another effort to rally and intimidate SADC to validate his presidency and rebuff his international critics. As long as that regional protection remains in place—typified by Thabo Mbeki’s continual rejection of any attempt to “internationalize” the crisis in Zimbabwe—Mugabe can act with impunity. If, however, that

essential ring of protection can be broken and SADC turns to the purpose of building the post-Mugabe future, Zimbabwe may finally enter a genuine transition, something the great majority of Zimbabweans and their neighbors will celebrate.

Mugabe's endgame is likely to be volatile and possibly dangerous. The most glaring uncertainties lie in how much violence it will inspire, how many more lives it will cost, and how much additional internal damage and regional instability a potentially chaotic transition will exact. Intimately tied to these concerns is the large, unanswered question of the international response: whether regional states, Western powers, and international organizations can somehow begin to act in concert to avert the worst outcomes and meaningfully create the basis for stability, renewed democratic progress, reconstruction, and economic growth. On this question, there is today no minimally coherent game plan.

There are four areas where urgent action is needed and where U.S. leadership can help forge a new, concerted international effort on Zimbabwe.

1. Win agreement on the lead message: no solution is possible until Mugabe goes. There is little to stop Mugabe from orchestrating a final orgy of violence. There is nothing to be gained and much to be lost by pursuing a presidential runoff, and no meaningful transition can commence until Mugabe has stepped aside. Agreement within the international community is urgently needed on a simple, clear-cut demand: that Mugabe leave. This should be the foremost guiding principle of coordinated international action on Zimbabwe. Choreographing Mugabe's departure will be complex and difficult, but the United States and others should clearly embrace this urgent goal and organize all other activity around it. African leaders are best positioned to deliver this message to Mugabe. The overriding focus of U.S. diplomacy should be to enlist African leaders to assume this responsibility.

2. Concentrate on reducing security risks. Zimbabwe's security chiefs and the forces under them can be violent spoilers. Some have much to lose once Mugabe is gone. Critical preemptive steps can be undertaken now, bilaterally, in the context of the UN Security Council and through ad hoc multilateral dialogues. Priority steps should include:

- Identify and reach out quietly to those elements of the security forces judged to be the most professional, least politicized, and least beholden to Mugabe.
- Identify likely spoilers and signal to them serious consequences that will follow their interference in a transition. Selectively release to international media what is known of the corrupt practices of the most venal.
- Assemble an incentives package for Zimbabwean officers who promise future cooperation, including training and educational opportunities to build professionalism and return Zimbabwe's forces to international respectability. For example, offer select Zimbabwean captains and colonels a year in the company of U.S. and international counterparts at the U.S. National War College, or at similarly prestigious institutions in Canada, Australia, or the United Kingdom.
- Insist that multinational observer teams be allowed into Zimbabwe to observe and report on security aspects of the transition process.
- Acknowledge that past serious human rights violations will require accountability. Zimbabwean legal and human rights advocates have been outspoken on this point, and they are correct. The trick will be phasing accountability measures to come at a later stage in the transition process and concentrating their focus.

3. Appoint an eminent persons group to organize power sharing. It is not clear even to opposition leaders that a brusque transfer of full executive power into the opposition's hands is a reliable or advisable route to stability and recovery. Much discussion is needed of possible power-sharing arrangements. While it is clear that Mugabe and the worst of his associates cannot be part of such an arrangement, less tainted, more moderate elements of ZANU-PF could contribute to the stability of transitional governing arrangements.

Such a discussion requires a forum that reaches beyond SADC but that does not leave the region behind. The United States and its allies should press for the appointment of an eminent persons group (EPG), possibly under African Union and/or UN auspices, to work with parties in Zimbabwe to constitute a new government and chart a near-term course for

constitutional reform and eventual parliamentary and presidential elections. The EPG could draw on the historical precedent of the 1985 EPG and its contribution to international debate on moving South Africa beyond apartheid. The negotiating formula could draw on former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan's efforts earlier this year in Kenya. *It should be endorsed, or even called for, by SADC, but not be subordinated to SADC, and certainly not controlled by South Africa.* Few Zimbabweans will have confidence in South African mediation following President Mbeki's failed efforts.

4. Assemble a robust post-Mugabe reconstruction package. Despite much talk in the United States and elsewhere about post-Mugabe scenarios, there has been little concrete planning. The United States and other major donors, including China and the World Bank, should quickly assemble a multi-sector recovery package, assign roles, and win commitments of funding. This should be embraced at the G-8 summit in Hokkaido July 7 to 9. Washington will need to give special priority to winning congressional backing for substantial, rapidly disburseable U.S. contributions.

Sustaining International Support

Zimbabwe is today and into the future the crisis priority for southern Africa. It faces immense challenges even after Mugabe leaves. Spoilers will threaten whatever consensus emerges for a way forward. More refugees will likely pour into the surrounding region in the near term, while eventually millions will desire to return home and face rising pressure from their host governments to do so rapidly. There will be intense pressures to stabilize and revitalize a ruined economy and bring back a once-thriving agricultural sector where complex land ownership controversies persist. The public health system, having lost more than 80 percent of its skilled work force, will require rebuilding from the ground up and special care to preserve ongoing antiretroviral services to 100,000 Zimbabweans. Key institutions—courts, universities, media, police, and armed forces—have been heavily damaged and will require special, concentrated reforms. Courageous civil organizations will continue to press for justice, especially in regard to serious human rights abuses and officially sanctioned egregious corruption.

Zimbabweans will find answers but cannot do so, at least in the short term, without vital international assistance. Zimbabweans have been badly let down in recent years, by SADC and South Africa especially. The United States should make clear that it is willing to work cooperatively with SADC in the context of a wider international effort to rescue Zimbabwe. The United States should be equally clear that it will not stand idly on the sidelines if the voices of Zimbabweans working for democracy, justice, and economic recovery are again ignored.

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