CRISIS AT THE POLLS

Restoring Democracy in Zimbabwe

Daniel B. Kobayashi

Abstract

Zimbabwe’s opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) carried the 2008 election by using wireless telecommunications and an elaborate system of poll monitoring to establish an alternative political narrative. Zimbabwe’s ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party, whose complacency allowed MDC to establish this narrative, responded by violently rigging the presidential runoff. While Zimbabweans had challenged ZANU-PF’s electoral authoritarian regime largely without external assistance, ZANU-PF’s monopoly on force and willingness to use violence against the population kept President Robert Mugabe in office. One year into a power sharing agreement that saw ZANU-PF retain control of state security organs, new elections are under discussion, and ZANU-PF will likely rig them violently. In order for Zimbabweans’ votes to have any chance to trump ZANU-PF’s guns, the international community—especially the African community—and regional civil society must back free elections through a combination of targeted sanctions, African-led condemnation, and perhaps international criminal charges against the regime.

Introduction: Votes and Guns, the Inseparable Twins

Our votes must go together with our guns. After all, any vote we shall have, shall have been the product of the gun. The gun which produces the vote should remain its security officer - its guarantor. The people’s votes and the people’s guns are always inseparable twins.

-Robert Gabriel Mugabe, 1976

In March 2008, Zimbabwe held presidential and parliamentary elections that tested President Robert Mugabe’s hypothesis that votes are meaningless without guns. The votes in 2008 belonged to the opposition Move-

‡ Daniel B. Kobayashi is a Master of Public Policy candidate at the Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University. He earned his Bachelor’s degree in Political Science and Public Policy from Boston University in 1998. Kobayashi has also served as Director of the Workforce Solutions Group, an economic development non-profit. He currently serves as a consultant on economic development in Africa.
ment for Democratic Change (MDC), while the guns belonged to Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). An 11-month stalemate resulted. Today, more than a year after a power sharing cabinet took office, the results of the experiment are still inconclusive. On one hand, MDC’s votes changed the nation’s political narrative and gave MDC the political leverage to take the premiership, the Ministry of Finance, and a number of other government ministries; from this perch in the government, MDC ended Zimbabwe’s ruinous hyperinflation. On the other hand, ZANU-PF retains the presidency and a legal monopoly on the use of force, allowing them to maintain control of most of the nation’s wealth and potentially win future power struggles through force of arms.

In his 2003 book Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe, Martin Meredith identified strong evidence that guns have historically trumped votes in Zimbabwe. This article will examine the tension between Mugabe’s “inseparable twins” in the 2008 election and the responses of the international community. This piece will then discuss recommendations for action for both Zimbabweans and the international community, as Mugabe calls for new elections in an effort to reassert his dominance.

**Dictatorship by another name**

Unlike many African countries, Zimbabwe has never officially been a one-party state. Despite ZANU-PF’s dominance, the opposition has always held some seats in parliament, and until 2001, there was a largely independent judiciary. Instead, Zimbabwe was an “electoral authoritarian regime,” wherein the ruling party desires “the veneer of political legitimacy provided by managed elections and the appearance of rule of law.” In every election, there was technically a choice of parties, but the ruling party rigged elections through media manipulation, fraud, or even violence.

“Mugabe has made a specialty of sham legality, lots of useless laws, phony rules that mean nothing,” says Foster Dongozi, Secretary General of the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists. “He knows how far to push us. He knows how to distract us with a veneer of normalcy. He knows how to beat us way down, but not so far as to embarrass his African neighbors.”

While opposition parties in electoral authoritarian regimes typically have little hope beyond gaining a few seats in parliament, occasionally a regime can grow overconfident and rig a vote incompetently. Under these circumstances, an election can become competitive. This situation arose in Zimbabwe in 2000, when a ZANU-PF referendum on a new constitution failed 55 percent to 45 percent. The failed referendum indicated a sufficiently competitive electoral system in Zimbabwe for the journal of Democracy to reclassify Zimbabwe as a “competitive authoritarian” state. Competitive authoritarianism differs from electoral authoritarianism in that there is meaningful parliamentary
opposition, even though the ruling party would not allow a transfer of power.\textsuperscript{9}

Following the 2000 referendum, ZANU-PF restored the electoral authoritarian model by force. First, they encouraged mobs of “war veterans” to seize white-owned farms and conducted Operation Murambatsvina, a slum-clearing campaign that punished urbanites, who were among the new Constitution’s strongest opponents.\textsuperscript{10} Then, ZANU-PF rigged the presidential election in 2002 by arresting opposition figures, closing polling places in MDC strongholds, and detaining international election observers.\textsuperscript{11} In 2005, they ended the era of competitive authoritarianism by denying as much as 30 percent of the electorate the right to vote in parliamentary elections.\textsuperscript{12}

By 2008 however, Mugabe’s government again began to assume that victory was inevitable. Despite eight years of hyperinflation that had led to an annualized inflation rate of 355,000 percent, bare shop shelves, and looming hunger for many Zimbabweans, ZANU-PF leaders continued to believe in their party’s popularity and treated the upcoming election results as a foregone conclusion.\textsuperscript{13}

“ZANU-PF began to be too relaxed about things,” said Ben Moyo, a long-time Mugabe supporter and former Member of Parliament. “We thought the people would vote for us, as they always do.”\textsuperscript{14}

Many MDC supporters and outside observers shared this expectation. In December 2007, three months before the election, one Zimbabwean close to the MDC, whose name has been withheld to protect his safety, told me that his party was dead and that the opposition needed to be rebuilt completely from the grassroots. This general complacency, however, created a tiny opportunity.

**How Sham Elections Become Real Elections**

An opposition party can turn a sham multi-party election of an electoral authoritarian state into a real vote if it can develop and disseminate an alternative political narrative—if it can prove that the will of the people is not what the ruling party claims. In order to create an alternative narrative, the opposition needs both facts that support its case and a means to communicate its narrative to the people and the outside world.

In the case of Zimbabwe, the facts emerged only because an overconfident ZANU-PF, after arresting and beating MDC presidential nominee Morgan Tsvangirai in March 2007, bowed to regional pressure and consented to talks on ensuring a fair election in 2008. While the talks eventually crumbled, ZANU-PF made one minor, seemingly symbolic concession: polling places would post a tally of local results at the close of the polls.\textsuperscript{15}

With this small concession, ZANU-PF opened the door to a competing electoral narrative: that MDC had carried the vote. When polls for the March 29, 2008, preliminary election closed, the Zimbabwe Election Support
Network (ZESN), a consortium of Zimbabwean civil society organizations, launched an effort to duplicate an election-monitoring strategy called Sample Based Observation\textsuperscript{16} that had been effective in the 2007 election in Sierra Leone.\textsuperscript{17} A network of 8,900 trained poll watchers tracked the results posted at each of a stratified sample of 435 polling places and used cell phones, common even in rural Zimbabwe, to transmit the data to ZESN headquarters in Harare. With the raw data secured, ZESN discovered that MDC had won a majority of parliament seats and possibly the presidency itself.\textsuperscript{18} Extrapolating from its sample, ZESN projected 49.4 percent of the vote for Tsvangirai to 41.8 percent for Mugabe. The 95 percent confidence interval for Tsvangirai’s percentage of the vote was 47.0 percent to 51.8 percent. While ZANU-PF has never revealed a true tally, ZESN’s sampling model suggests that there is a credible chance that a full and proper count of the ballots might have given Tsvangirai the 50 percent majority required to claim victory.\textsuperscript{19} Before ZANU-PF intimidation could begin, ZESN had already used cell phones to send its projection throughout Zimbabwe and around the world.\textsuperscript{20}

This competing narrative stripped ZANU-PF of the ability to tidily rig the election. There are three options for rigging an election: controlling the names on the ballot, forbidding or dissuading citizens from voting, and manipulating the tally. ZANU-PF had already allowed MDC candidates on the ballot, and while it had intimidated voters, the large turnout for MDC suggests that it had not done nearly enough to frighten away the masses angered by Zimbabwe’s economic disaster. Thus, vote counting presented the only remaining opportunity to rig the election, and with ZESN’s projection, that corruption point quickly evaporated.

Faced with the worldwide wireless distribution of ZESN data showing that it did not have public support, and having also lost its best chances to cleanly rig the election, ZANU-PF retreated for just over one month, refusing to release official poll numbers. When the Zimbabwe Elections Commission (ZEC) finally released the results on May 1, they were almost certainly fraudulent, but were nevertheless extraordinary: MDC had won control of parliament. While ZEC did not award Morgan Tsvangirai the majority needed to claim the presidency, the ZESN analysis appears to have influenced the official tally. ZEC awarded Tsvangirai a plurality of 47.9 percent, a figure at the bottom end of ZESN’s 95 percent confidence interval, forcing a presidential runoff election for the first time in Zimbabwean history.\textsuperscript{21} While MDC had not taken the presidency, and the true election tally remains unknown, ZESN’s efforts had forced ZANU-PF to make major concessions. Election monitoring had worked. The votes’ power reached its peak, and then the guns came into play.
How State Power Can Thwart Democracy

With a Presidential runoff looming and MDC supporters exuberant, Mugabe faced the prospect of losing power in an electoral revolution. However, ZANU-PF retained a critical weapon: control over the organs of state power and paramilitary organizations, and a willingness to use them to brutalize MDC supporters and influence the elections. State security forces and police repeatedly arrested and beat Tsvangirai and other top MDC officials. ZANU-PF, “war veterans,” and the police murdered 180 MDC supporters and tortured or beat 9,000 others. 28,000 people fled their homes.22

Five days before the runoff, ZANU-PF accomplished its objective: Morgan Tsvangirai, who had taken asylum in the Dutch Embassy, announced his withdrawal from the campaign, saying that he could no longer ask Zimbabweans to vote “when that vote could cost them their lives.”23 Mugabe won the newly uncontested presidential election, yet still faced an MDC majority in parliament and the prospect of a Tsvangirai premiership.

A few African leaders, most notably Patrick Levy Mwanawasa of Zambia and Ian Khama of Botswana, joined Western leaders in condemning the violence, but far more African leaders declined to condemn Mugabe. South African President Thabo Mbeki, asked by the South African Development Community (SADC) to mediate, appeared particularly quiet, ostensibly in the service of diplomacy.

Whatever the moral dimension of his silence, as the SADC mediator and President of the region’s dominant power, Mbeki was critical to negotiating a power sharing agreement between Mugabe and Tsvangirai. Negotiators faced formidable questions. Who would wield executive power, the president or the prime minister? More specifically, who would control the state security apparatus? Would MDC get the guns to accompany its votes?24

MDC correctly discerned that without possession of at least one of the ministries controlling the use of force, any power it gained would be ephemeral. With the once independent judiciary full of ZANU-PF partisans, and television and radio still under ZANU-PF control, only MDC control of the police or army could create the checks and balances needed for true power sharing.24 Thus, control over at least some of the levers of force became MDC’s central demand.

Ultimately, Mbeki negotiated a deal, signed on September 15, 2008, that made Mugabe President and Tsvangirai Prime Minister. The deal also gave 15 ministries to ZANU-PF, 13 to Tsvangirai’s faction of MDC, called MDC-T, and three to the dissident MDC-M faction controlled by Arthur Mutambara. Most importantly, while ZANU-PF retained control of the military, MDC would control the Ministry of the Home Affairs, which includes the police.25

Despite signing the agreement, Mugabe refused to actually relinquish control of the police. For six months the agreement remained unimplemented,
as ZANU-PF insisted that control of Home Affairs should be “shared” by ZANU-PF and MDC. MDC rejected this proposal and appealed to SADC for a resolution ordering the implementation of the signed agreement. Stunningly, SADC sided with ZANU-PF, ruling that there should be shared control of the Ministry of Home Affairs. This decision led MDC to call for the removal of Thabo Mbeki from his role as mediator. In a heavily publicized spat, Tsvangirai called SADC leaders “cowards,” and MDC Secretary General Tendai Biti sent a letter to Mbeki condemning the SADC ruling as a “nullity.” Mbeki responded with a letter to Tsvangirai scolding MDC for its “contempt for the decisions of its immediate African neighbors” and insisting that only shared control of the police could solve issues of violence and intimidation. In February 2009, Tsvangirai swore in a new cabinet when MDC, under pressure from SADC, relented and allowed joint control of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

**What now? Advancing democracy after government violence**

As of early 2010, the power sharing government remains tenuously in place. Votes have won MDC a seat at the table, but ZANU-PF’s guns have kept Robert Mugabe at its head. While the MDC ministers have enjoyed some major economic successes, most notably ending hyperinflation, MDC remains unlikely to displace Mugabe as long as ZANU-PF controls the state security organs. Even a new election may not improve MDC’s position as long as ZANU-PF retains the ability to undermine the vote with state violence. Indeed, Mugabe’s recent call for a new election suggests that ZANU-PF believes they would have the upper hand in a vote. In an environment where organized violence will likely mar any election, a change of power at the ballot box is unlikely without support from outside actors. The question is whether these actors have the will and the tools to bolster Zimbabwean democracy.

**Speaking out: International condemnation of the Mugabe regime**

**Western criticism can be counterproductive**

For years, western governments have spoken out against the ZANU-PF regime. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and his predecessor Tony Blair have been particularly emphatic in their condemnations, and former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice denounced the “sham election” and “sham power-sharing talks.”

While condemnation appears tactically conservative, most Western criticism of ZANU-PF may be counterproductive. Mugabe uses his victory over colonialism to bolster his legitimacy. Therefore, when Western leaders snub Mugabe, they provide fodder for state propaganda portraying him as the scourge of the colonizers. For instance, one brochure from the runoff asked, “What do the Americans and British want from Zimbabwe? Our Minerals!”

Inversely, MDC’s support from western governments makes it suspect
in the eyes of some Zimbabweans. The more vocal Western governments’ support for MDC is, the more plausible appear Mugabe’s claims that MDC is a puppet of the Western world. Elias Mudzuri, MDC’s national organizing secretary, believes the good outweighs the harm. “We are isolated here, fighting for democracy, but we need the West to help us,” said Mudzuri. “I am not ashamed to say this. I am not a puppet of the West.”

A few Western countries have stronger ground from which to criticize ZANU-PF. In particular, the Nordic countries enjoy credibility with Zimbabweans because of their financial support for ZANU-PF during the revolutionary era. Thus, an EU strategy wherein Nordic countries take the lead in criticizing Mugabe might be more effective than a campaign led by Britain.

African criticism resonates with Zimbabweans

Criticism from African leaders holds greater credibility because Mugabe cannot dismiss it as neocolonial. After years of silence, a number of prominent African leaders spoke up when the election turned ugly and the economy deteriorated. Former South African President Nelson Mandela condemned Mugabe’s “tragic failure of leadership,” and retired Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town Desmond Tutu accused Mugabe of “gross violations” of human rights and demanded that he step down. Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga was even more forceful, comparing Mugabe to Idi Amin, former dictator of Uganda. These condemnations, made by two Nobel-winning heroes of the struggle against Apartheid and one modernizing prime minister, suggest that African leaders are increasingly agitated with ZANU-PF.

Western criticism, while generally ineffective on its own, can be valuable when linked to these African voices. By joining with credible African partners, Western leaders can make their condemnations clear while limiting the taint of colonialism on their remarks. For example, in April 2008, Gordon Brown issued a joint statement with African National Congress leader Jacob Zuma denouncing Mugabe’s sham reelection. Similarly, when MDC agreed to enter the unity government, the U.S. State Department linked its comments to African criticisms by saying:

The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has agreed to join a unity government with Robert Mugabe under the conditions called for in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) January 27 Communiqué. The success or failure of such a government will depend on credible and inclusive power sharing by Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party.

Human rights organizations call for condemnation and human rights monitors

Leading human rights organizations endorse speaking out, even by
Western countries. In Amnesty International’s report “Time for Accountability,” the only recommendation to the international community is that all nations, and particularly those in Africa, should condemn ZANU-PF’s human rights violations.\textsuperscript{38} Human Rights Watch (HRW) shares this perspective, but focuses its fire on SADC. HRW argues that SADC must speak out in order to avoid losing credibility on human rights, and should even dispatch human rights monitors to Zimbabwe.\textsuperscript{39} Monitors might diminish abuses and would, at the very least, amplify international condemnations of ZANU-PF.

Refusing to admit monitors would provide further evidence to Zimbabweans and their neighbors that ZANU-PF has no intention of holding free elections. Along these lines, ZANU-PF has been pilloried throughout southern Africa for its refusal to admit a delegation of “elders” consisting of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, and Graça Machel, the widow of late Mozambique President Samora Machel and current wife of Nelson Mandela.

\textit{Sanctions: How to punish ZANU-PF without punishing Zimbabweans}

\textbf{Broad sanctions are politically impractical and morally dubious}

While broad sanctions are another option, few Zimbabweans at home or abroad support them, as they would further strain the Zimbabwean people by cutting off vital economic supplies. Moreover, little chance remains of getting sanctions through the UN Security Council. China, Russia, and South Africa have repeatedly blocked Security Council efforts to impose sanctions.\textsuperscript{40} In fact, Zimbabwe has viewed partnering with China and Russia as an alternative to cooperation with the West, going so far as to launch an initiative called “Look East.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textit{Targeted sanctions punish ZANU-PF}

Targeted sanctions aimed at ZANU-PF leadership are more promising. Individual Western countries have already frozen the assets of Mugabe and other top ZANU-PF leaders and banned the leaders from their territory. Former U.S. Ambassador James McGee expressed support for targeted sanctions, saying:

\begin{quote}
Our sanctions really do work. I meet, with some regularity, with one of the top leaders here in Zimbabwe. And he has about $7 million of his funding that’s been frozen because of U.S. sanctions against Zimbabwe. And he starts out each and every meeting with the same thing: Where is my money?\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

A 2008 expansion of targeted sanctions has increased the pressure on ZANU-PF. In early December 2008, the U.S. Treasury froze the assets of two
white Zimbabwean businessmen, a Malaysian urologist, and a Thai businesswoman—all of whom played major roles in financing the Mugabe regime. If businesspeople believe that working with the Mugabe regime may endanger their personal assets held in Western banks, Mugabe may soon find it more difficult to finance his regime.

While one should not overstate the impact of targeted sanctions, the attention ZANU-PF has paid to getting them lifted indicates the sanctions have had an impact. Additionally, sanctions have given MDC leverage. In recent negotiations concerning new elections and the future of the power sharing agreement, ZANU-PF negotiators’ demands have centered on getting MDC to persuade the European Union to lift sanctions on ZANU-PF officials. While it is not clear that MDC has such influence, the sanctions afford Western powers, and perhaps MDC, something tangible they can give ZANU-PF in return for major concessions.

Encirclement: An African solution to ZANU-PF intransigence
A blockade may be effective but illegal

Zimbabwe is landlocked, so economically isolating it would require neither Security Council approval of sanctions nor a SADC endorsement, though both are desirable. Instead, an agreement among the four countries that border Zimbabwe—Botswana, Zambia, South Africa, and Mozambique—could strangle the Mugabe regime. While closing borders to all trade might exert a greater impact on the hungry Zimbabwean population than the elites, closing borders to traffic in arms, luxury items, and non-essential goods could pressure ZANU-PF without further devastating the population. Also, an alliance of the four bordering countries could effectively forbid ZANU-PF officials from leaving the country, forcing them to live to a greater extent with the economic consequences of their policies. Archbishop Tutu has endorsed elements of this plan by urging the four neighbors to impose a flight ban.

This approach faces two obstacles. First, a blockade of this sort may violate the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which guarantees landlocked countries access to the sea and to which all four bordering countries have agreed. Second, at least one of Zimbabwe’s neighbors may refuse to close the borders. While Botswana, whom Zimbabwe has accused of harboring MDC military training camps, and Zambia may support a blockade, South Africa and Mozambique likely will hesitate. Any effective action must have South African support because 65 percent of Zimbabwe’s imports flow through the Beitbridge crossing with South Africa. New South African President Jacob Zuma is far less sympathetic to Mugabe than Thabo Mbeki, saying, “We cannot agree with ZANU-PF. We cannot agree with them on values.” However, Zuma is still unlikely to support a blockade, having recently urged Tsvangirai to make concessions in power sharing while relaxing pressure on Mugabe.
South African labor can close the border

The powerful Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which supports fellow trade unionist Tsvangirai, has contemplated forcibly closing the Beitbridge border for some time.51 While COSATU could not implement a flight ban and probably could not enforce a blockade that allows food but blocks nonessential items, it could close the border without approval from the South African government. It is unclear, however, whether COSATU would be willing to alienate Zuma, a trade unionist and long-time ally, or inflict the pain of a blockade on average Zimbabweans.

Mozambique’s porous border remains a challenge

Mozambique provides the greatest obstacle to an effective encirclement policy. Zimbabwe’s 1,231 kilometer border with Mozambique is its longest, and Mozambique’s governing Frelimo party is a longtime ZANU-PF ally. However, Mozambique has taken modest measures against Zimbabwe in the past. In July 2008, Mozambique put strict controls on exports of foodstuffs and goods to Zimbabwe;52 and as choleric refugees flooded over the border following the runoff election, Mozambique placed all border stations on maximum alert.53 While Mozambique would not consider a blockade now that the cholera epidemic has ended and political violence in Zimbabwe has eased, its actions in 2008 suggest that, in the event of a renewed crisis, a blockade is a possibility. However, regardless of will, Mozambique’s capacity to seal its vast border with Zimbabwe is unclear.

Trade union solidarity: Laboring for MDC

In addition to the threatened blockade of Beitbridge, the African labor movement led the regional civil society response to the Zimbabwean crisis. During the runoff, longshoremen in South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, and Angola refused to offload weapons from a Chinese ship destined for Zimbabwe. While some African leaders may have hesitated to challenge a fellow head of state and hero of the fight against colonialism, however tarnished, African workers appear to have no such qualms. The efforts of trade unionists in the SADC region have emboldened Zimbabwe’s own labor movement. Even as Tsvangirai, the former labor leader, struggled to get the regime to make concessions, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) won the first major civil society concession from the government. On November 27, 2008, ZCTU called for mass action in protest of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe’s limit on cash withdrawals to Z$500,000 (about one-half the cost of a loaf of bread). In an unprecedented move, bank Governor Gideon Gono bowed to pressure and raised the caps.54

Trade unions from across Africa have held meetings to address the Zimbabwean crisis and coordinate strategy. Because labor has had the greatest
success in organizing against ZANU-PF both inside and outside of Zimbabwe, President Obama should consider showing support by sending a U.S. delegation that includes prominent American labor officials to the next African meeting on the subject. One possible member of such a delegation would be AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, who has already sent a letter to Mugabe protesting his abuse of labor.  

*War crimes indictments: Criminalizing oppression*

Another tactic suggested by Archbishop Tutu is threatening Mugabe and other ZANU-PF officials with war crimes indictments if they refuse to step aside. An indictment could further restrict Mugabe’s movement and might lead other African leaders to distance themselves from him. Recent experience provides mixed evidence on this approach. When the International Criminal Court indicted Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir for war crimes, the African Union condemned the move and refused to extradite al-Bashir or restrict his movement. However, some African countries have broken with this policy and vowed to arrest al-Bashir if given the chance. For example, al-Bashir cancelled a planned trip to Uganda after Uganda Internal Affairs Minister Henry Oryem Okello stated that he would “ensure that he [Bashir] is arrested.”

While indicting Mugabe is tempting, it is also risky. The threat of an indictment may be useful, but an actual indictment might increase the resolve of Mugabe and his allies to cling to power. Although ZANU-PF could conceivably win amnesty from an MDC government as part of a deal to concede power, they could never win amnesty from the International Criminal Court. Moreover, little precedent exists for a sitting president to surrender willingly to an international tribunal. While Charles Taylor of Liberia left power upon indictment for war crimes, he only fled once his position became militarily untenable. Al-Bashir, who faces no imminent military threat, remains securely in power. Perhaps the only example of a head of state or government willingly turning himself over to an international tribunal is former Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj; he voluntarily left his post to face war crimes charges, of which he was later acquitted. However, Haradinaj is an unusual case, because his territory was under UN Administration when he surrendered.

*Conclusion: Without guns, votes need external backing*

Today, the Zimbabwean crisis has waned and settled onto an uneasy plateau: hyperinflation has ended and political violence has slowed. However, another crisis appears inevitable, though not imminent: the 86-year-old Mugabe will eventually bow to time, if he does not first fall to votes or guns. The events of 2008 offer valuable lessons as to how Zimbabweans, as well as the Southern African and international communities, can increase the likelihood that the next crisis is less traumatic and the outcomes more promising.
First, while democratic movements cannot peacefully overthrow a regime committed to retaining power, willing to use force, and indifferent to the fate of the people, they can force a regime to a decision point by creating and disseminating an alternative political narrative. By gathering and communicating real election numbers, ZESN revealed the will of the people and forced ZANU-PF leaders to decide whether they were willing to use large-scale force against their own people to retain power. Even when ZANU-PF used massive violence, it could not eliminate the alternative political narrative. Thanks to ZESN and its text messages and phone calls, Zimbabweans know how they voted. Despite maintaining control of the police and military, ZANU-PF suffered from a crisis of legitimacy that forced it to make concessions to MDC. When the next election comes, perhaps the 86-year-old Mugabe will have died, and the will of the people as revealed by a vote could bring an even more empathetic regime to heel. Either way, polling station monitoring is essential for establishing an alternative narrative.

Second, when vetoes hamper the Security Council, regional organizations and individual nations can take actions to shape political outcomes in neighboring countries. A unified effort by SADC, or even just the four nations that border Zimbabwe, would pressure the Mugabe regime and potentially force ZANU-PF officials to live with the consequences of their policies. ZANU-PF officials may be more willing to allow truly free and fair elections and accept their outcomes if faced with a choice between being trapped in a country-sized prison or yielding power.

Third, governments and NGOs are not the only actors in international affairs; regional civil society organizations, and even domestic organizations in neighboring countries, can influence a country’s internal affairs. COSATU has the ability, independent of the government of South Africa, to blockade the Beitbridge crossing and inflict a severe economic wound on the Mugabe regime.

Finally, while the West cannot always wield much direct influence on events in distant parts of the world, it can support regional efforts to solve crises by lending technical advice or support to civil society organizations, coordinating statements with regional leaders, and carefully selecting its spokesmen.

As both the Zimbabwean opposition and the international community prepare for the as yet unscheduled upcoming election, they would do well to listen to the words of Robert Mugabe himself. Reaffirming his 1976 comments following the first round of the 2008 elections, Mugabe said, “We are not going to give up our country for a mere X on a ballot. How can a ballpoint pen fight with a gun?” Perhaps the pen alone is not mightier than the sword. But when informed Zimbabwean voters wield that pen with the support of southern African civil society, targeted international sanctions, an observant
international criminal court, and compassionate neighboring nations, the battle between votes and guns may at least become a fair fight.

Endnotes
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