

Zimbabwe: A way out of the crisis?

With Zimbabwe's economy in meltdown, drastic and fundamental changes are crucial if there is to be a return of international investment and a recovery in that country.

Harare - The International Crisis Group (ICG), a nongovernmental conflict resolution organisation, believes conditions in Zimbabwe are crystallising and could lead to a rapid reversal of the country's ill-fortunes, but the scenario is based on President Robert Mugabe's 27-year-rule ending.

Harare - "After years of political deadlock and continued economic and humanitarian decline, a realistic chance has at last begun to appear, in the past few months, to resolve the Zimbabwe crisis," said ICG president Gareth Evans in a recent address, Zimbabwe: Waiting for Change, to the Royal Commonwealth Society, in London.

Zimbabwe has suffered a sharp downward spiral since 2000, when the ZANU-PF government embarked on its fast-track land-reform programme, which redistributed white-owned farmland to landless blacks, setting off a chain of events that has left more than a third of all Zimbabweans facing severe food shortages.

According to the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industry (CZI), industrial output is at about one-third of its pre-2000 level, resulting in a negative economic growth rate of -4.4%. Recent data from the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe (CCZ) puts annual inflation above 13,000%, a rate the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts could reach 100,000% by the end of the year.

Four out of five Zimbabweans are unemployed, basic commodities such as bread, sugar and maize meal are unobtainable, and shortages of fuel, electricity and water are a daily occurrence; social services have broken down, with hospitals and clinics operating without adequate medical equipment or supplies.

Evans said in his address that should Mugabe leave office, conditions were ripe for the introduction of a power-sharing transitional government, the establishment of a new constitution, and holding free and fair elections.

Although Mugabe was recently endorsed by ZANU-PF as its presidential candidate for combined presidential and parliamentary elections in March next year, while the ZANU-PF Women's League has proposed installing him as president for life, influential elements in the ruling party ranks opposed to Mugabe's continued presidency are in favour of a transitional period.

"Both factions of the divided Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) opposition, and powerful elements of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (currently ruling) party support the concept in outline," Evans said.

The MDC split in October 2005 after internal disagreements about whether or not to participate in the Senate elections,

although the leaders of both camps, Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara, have publicly announced that the factions would not reunite.

Mugabe faces growing opposition from his party

A ZANU-PF camp led by a retired army general, Solomon Mujuru, husband of Joyce, one of the country's two vice-presidents, successfully opposed moves to amend the constitution in December 2006 to harmonise presidential and parliamentary elections, but despite Mujuru's initial success in blocking the harmonisation of elections, the constitutional amendments were passed.

A ruling party stalwart, Ibbo Mandaza, recently called on Mugabe to step down by September 2007 to prevent the economic and political crises from worsening, and another camp within ZANU-PF is led by rural amenities minister Emmerson Mnangagwa, who is also seen as a possible replacement for Mugabe.

The cracks in the ZANU-PF edifice have become more apparent: first with the arrest in June of several army officers alleged to have been on the brink of staging a coup, in which, state prosecutors allege, power would have been handed over to Mnangagwa.

Next, Simba Makoni, a member of the ruling party's powerful politburo, told delegates at a workshop in South Africa in July that "a process of change" was underway in ZANU-PF. His comments drew an immediate riposte from information minister Sikhanyiso Ndlovu, who labelled Makoni a "sell-out".

Evans said the growing opposition to Mugabe's rule by ZANU-PF heavyweights was a consequence of the adverse affect on their businesses, after the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) introduced targeted sanctions against Mugabe and members of the ruling elite for alleged human rights violations.

"The economic meltdown, as well as the bite of EU and US targeted sanctions, is pushing ZANU-PF towards change, since business interests of key officials are suffering," said Evans.

"The party is split over the succession issue, but Mugabe's long-successful divide-and-rule tactics have started to backfire, as the two main (ZANU-PF) factions are coming together to try to prevent him from staying beyond the expiration of his present term in March 2008."

He said there was simmering discontent lower down the hierarchy among military and security personnel because of poor wages, while continued protests in spite of government suppression, were putting the country on a knife-edge.

"Salaries of the security services and civil servants alike are mostly below the poverty line. Economic issues, discontent among underpaid police and troops, and the increasing willingness of opposition parties and civil society to protest in the streets, all increase the risk of sudden major violence.

"The desire to remove Mugabe within the year provides a rare rallying point that cuts across partisan affiliations and ethnic and regional identities. Opposition party leaders are keeping lines of communication open with the ZANU-PF dissidents, while preparing for a non-violent campaign to demand immediate constitutional reform," Evans said.

Role of international community

He said the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which is to meet later this month in the Zambian capital, Lusaka, and the international community "can make a vital contribution to resolving the crisis".

The SADC has completed an economic assessment of Zimbabwe and its secretary-general, Tomaz Salomao, recently handed over his report to the President of Tanzania, Jakaya Kikwete, who heads the SADC's regional security arm. The regional bloc has also appointed the South African president, Thabo Mbeki, to mediate between Zimbabwe's ruling party

and opposition to ensure free and fair elections in March 2008.

"SADC governments, who for long have been extremely reluctant to press Mugabe, now privately acknowledge they want him out to pave the way for a moderate ZANU-PF government," Evans said.

"Without applying public pressure, the SADC troika (Tanzania, Lesotho and Namibia) is quietly beginning to explore ways to negotiate a retirement package for the president, while persuading the West to relax its pressures."

However, Mugabe's departure from office was the starting point, he said, and Zimbabwe would need "a more radical change to get back on its feet".

Evans recommended that ZANU-PF should "abandon plans to extend President Mugabe's term of office beyond its expiration in March 2008, and support SADC-led negotiations to implement an exit strategy for him".

The ruling party should negotiate a new constitution, a two-year political transition period and power sharing with the MDC, and put in place "an emergency economic recovery plan to curb inflation, restore donor and foreign confidence, and boost mining and agricultural production". At the same time, it should repeal repressive laws, draw up a new voters' roll, and demilitarise and depoliticise state institutions.

He said homeless citizens should be provided with shelter, while those whose homes were destroyed during the 2005 "Operation Murambatsvina" (Drive Out Trash) - a three-month campaign to rid the country of slums and illegal informal businesses that led to about 700,000 people losing their homes and livelihoods - should be compensated.

Evans called for "an urgent meeting of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Co-operation to consider the regional consequence of the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe" and said the SADC should devise a joint strategy with the EU and the US to incentivise the resumption of aid to Zimbabwe.

The EU and the US should also increase pressure on Mugabe and other ZANU-PF leaders "to begin a transition and restore democracy". If they failed to do so, the targeted sanctions should be extended to family members and business partners of individuals already banned from travelling to the EU and US, and have had their foreign assets frozen; their visas and residence permits should be cancelled, while more funding should be given to pro-democracy activists.

David Chimhini, chairman of the Zimbabwe Civic Education Trust (ZIMCET), which promotes peace initiatives in the country, said the international community was welcome to help solve local problems, but Zimbabweans should be at the forefront of such efforts.

"We have people from the ruling party and the opposition who are capable of bringing back the shine to the country again, but the problem is that there is a culture of fear that prevents them from taking the front seat," Chimhini told IRIN.

"While you cannot bog down the process of a turnaround with stringent timetables, evidence abounds that things will normalise one day and we don't need to rush the process; we still have the natural resources and human expertise for that to happen."

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