

## Zimbabwe's Politics of Despair

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### Introduction

In an insightful commentary on the current state of Zimbabwe politics, Joost Fontein writes about the prevalence of despondency in which a 'new timescale of hope and aspiration' has emerged 'that makes both the present and any immediate future appear equally uninspiring.'<sup>1</sup> In many ways this resignation to the politics of the long haul reflects the loss of hope in an imminent alternative, which was the structure of feeling that fuelled the social imagination of opposition and civic politics from the late 1990's until the complexities and complicities of the Global Political Agreement. Underlying this politics of despair are a plethora of factors, ranging from the re-organisation of Zanu PF and its political machinery of patronage, coercion and electoral chicanery, to the massive dissipation of opposition energies in the context of large-scale changes in Zimbabwe social structure since the 1990's. The recent implosion in Zanu PF around the

politics of succession have, moreover, provided further evidence of the pervasive mood of despair in Zimbabwe's polity, even against the background of the ruling party's purported victory and resurgence in the 2013 election.

## **International Context and Zimbabwe**

In this discussion I want to concentrate on the broader international context in which Zimbabwean politics is being contested, because this provides a larger vista to gauge the possibilities for new political alternatives to emerge. In October 2014 the EU lifted its 12 year restrictive measures on particular agencies in the Government of Zimbabwe under Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement, although the measures against Mugabe, his wife and the supply of military equipment remained in place. This position was slightly modified with Mugabe's elevation to the Chair of the African Union in February 2015. Following this development the restrictions on Mugabe were revised allowing EU member states to grant exemptions, 'where travel is justified on the grounds of urgent humanitarian need, or in exceptional cases on grounds of attending intergovernmental meetings and those promoted or hosted by the European Union.'<sup>2</sup> Following the lifting of most of the restrictive measures various EU trade delegations visited Zimbabwe as a further step towards the normalisation of relations between the two. Under this process of normalisation the EU assistance to the Government of Zimbabwe, though not through direct budget support, will be focused on three areas: improving health outcomes; support for economic development based on sustained agriculture; and institutional strengthening to consolidate the democratic process, peace and stability.<sup>3</sup> However despite this movement away from hostility the EU still await more positive policy signals from the Zimbabwe Government in a number of areas including: greater clarity on the Indigenisation legislation; and a more comprehensive implementation of the new constitution and the rule of law. In line with this last issue the EU, in March 2014, committed \$US1.8 million to assist the Government of Zimbabwe with its constitutional legislative realignment process. This fund will be channelled through the Centre for Applied Legal Research which will provide technical support to the Ministry of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs.

On its part in March 2015 the US Government renewed the targeted measures against particular individuals and entities in the Zimbabwe Government under the ZDERA, introduced in the early 2000's in response to the attacks on human and property rights by the Zimbabwean state. A useful place to begin to understand the reasoning behind this continued stand is a recent paper from the Council on Foreign Relations, Centre for Preventive Action in the US, written by George Ward. The paper makes it clear that Zimbabwe is 'far down the current list of executive branch foreign policy priorities with Congress,' and that the US has 'few policy instruments for directly influencing developments' in the country. Of greater strategic importance to the US has been the growth of Islamic militancy in East and West Africa, which the recent alignment between Boko Haram with Isil will only have intensified. In this context the paper observes that:

***Even as its bilateral relationship with the governments of East and West Africa have grown stronger, the United States' ties with the SADC countries have tended to stagnate. This has been particularly true in the case of South Africa. While differences over Zimbabwe have not been the primary driver of US relationships with the southern African region, they have been a significant negative element.***<sup>4</sup>

Of course the current US position on Southern Africa was not always the case. During the Cold War the Reagan-Thatcher axis supported the Apartheid regime as part of its global battle against communism, and the US policy of Constructive Engagement had hugely destructive effects on countries in the region, particularly Angola and Mozambique. While Zimbabwe also suffered from the effects of South African destabilisation, Mugabe also used the space offered by the contending players in the Cold War, namely the West, the Soviet Unions and the Apartheid state, to pursue his own authoritarian agenda in the country. As Tim Scarnecchia makes clear in his devastating critique of Western, Apartheid and Zimbabwe foreign policy during the early 1980's, Mugabe used the tensions of the Cold War both to seek Western support and to work with the South African Defence Force against ZAPU because of the latter's ties with the ANC, and the support of both by the Soviet Union. Under the aegis of what Scarnecchia calls Mugabe's Cold War

shield, the Zimbabwean leader was able to carry out the atrocities of the Gukurahundi period with no criticism from the West.<sup>5</sup> Against the arguments in Scarnecchia's analysis Vice President Mphoko's claim that 'Gukurahundi was a conspiracy of the West'<sup>6</sup> is exposed as a spurious attempt to rationalise the violence of the post-colonial Zimbabwean state.

In the current period of the post-Cold War era and the 'war against terror' by the West, the geopolitical interests of the US have shifted in Africa generally and Zimbabwe and Southern Africa more particularly. Ward observes that Zimbabwe presents an opening for the US and South Africa to strengthen their partnership, as both countries share an interest in promoting 'stability and peaceful change' since their differences over the country have been 'more over tone and tactics than over ultimate objectives.'<sup>7</sup> Given the present balance of political forces in the country and the limited ability of the US to influence the transition process, Ward's advice is that the US should work to reduce the possibility of political violence during the post-Mugabe succession, 'while laying the groundwork for a better relationship with an eventual successor government.' Thus notwithstanding Ward's observation that it will be important for the US 'to watch for increased willingness on the part of the political opposition and civil society to carry out protest activities,' his greater concern is that a crisis in Zimbabwe could lead to potential friction with South Africa and SADC 'on how to respond to human rights violations by the Zimbabwe government.'<sup>8</sup>

For South Africa and SADC this emphasis on stabilisation and security rather than democratisation points to the growing convergence between such thinking and the realpolitik that guided the facilitation of the Global Political Agreement in Zimbabwe in 2007-2008. Furthermore this trend accords with David Moore's assessment that a quarter century after the Cold War development discourse has become less enthusiastic about fully democratic states.<sup>9</sup> As Chair of the AU Mugabe has already begun to express his concerns about Al Shabaab and Boko Haram and the need for the different regions in Africa to strengthen their security.<sup>10</sup> In a similar manner to the way he operated during the Cold War Mugabe could use this language around securitisation that converges with a global discourse on this issue, as a new shield for his authoritarian politics in Zimbabwe.

A similar discourse on stabilisation and normalisation of relations with the West is taking place in discussions on the deepening crisis in the Zimbabwean economy, notwithstanding the continued nationalist rhetoric around Indigenisation and nationalisation of the mines. Moreover this message has been dominant since the 2013 Elections.<sup>11</sup> A recent statement by the IMF on the Government's economic policies stated that despite substantial economic and financial difficulties Zimbabwean authorities have 'made progress in implementing their reform programme, meeting all quantitative targets and structural benchmarks,' for the first review under the Staff Monitored Programme. Furthermore the IMF notes that the Government of Zimbabwe have stepped up reengagement with creditors signalling 'important steps towards reengaging with international financial institutions.' Amongst the measures being put in place to relieve the debt distress in the country the Zimbabwean Government has pledged to move resources from the public sector wage bill to capital and social spending. In addition, in order to improve the economy's competitiveness the Government had agreed to produce a simplified summary of the Economic Empowerment Laws and to review the 1985 Labour Relations Act.<sup>12</sup> In a strategic move to use adherence to IMF conditionality as a shield to attack the various Commissions and devolution structures set up under the new constitution to widen the spaces for democratic accountability, the Minister of Finance and Economic Development recently proposed that the Government should revisit the Constitution in order trim these institutions and the bloated bureaucracy attached to them.<sup>13</sup> Any conception that such a review would need to include Zanu PF's expansion of the security services integral to its authoritarian politics is, not surprisingly, missing from this proposal for greater budgetary discipline.

In combination with this attempt at a normalisation of relations with the West the Mugabe regime has strengthened its links with the East and particularly China, with bilateral trade between the two countries increasing from US\$1.1 billion in 2013 to US\$1.4 billion on 2015. However while China has combined its support for Zanu PF's authoritarian politics with a longer term commitment to investment in the context of nation building and post-conflict development, as it has in other parts of Africa,<sup>14</sup> Chinese state investors, in

the words of Ching Kwan Lee, have neither the capacity nor any interest in replacing the dominant global neoliberal economic order.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

Given this international setting the challenges for the opposition in developing an alternative vision for Zimbabwe are immense. At a domestic level the opposition has to confront the combined coercive and patronage structures of the ruling party. On a broader regional and international plane the opposition must contend with Zanu PF's capacity to combine its nationalist and Pan Africanist invocations with the 'normalisation' discourse of neoliberalism and the clear international trend towards re-engagement with the Mugabe regime. Zanu PF's ability to include these varying elements in its ideological constructions will make it difficult for the opposition to set out the particularities of its own position in a global context in which the calls for democratisation are being pushed back by the statist imperatives of securitisation and stabilisation with few attempts to confront the constraints of neoliberalism. The persistent bickering and loss of influence of the opposition parties, exemplified most recently by the gifting of 21 legislative seats to Zanu PF because of an inability of the two MDCs to work together, is symptomatic of what happens to opposition movements when they lose the capacity to articulate an alternative social vision for the citizenry.

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<sup>1</sup> Joost Fontein, 'Zimbabwe: The darkest hour is not before dawn.' <http://africanarguments.org/2015/03/16/zimbabwe-the-darkest-hour-is-not-before-dawn> Accessed on 17/03/2015.

<sup>2</sup> 'EU says it didn't relax travel ban.' <Http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-20339-EU+says+it+didn't+relax+travel+ban/> Accessed on 05/02/2015.

<sup>3</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> European Development Fund, Draft National Initiative Programme (2014-2020) for Cooperation between the Republic of Zimbabwe and the European Union, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> George F. Ward, 'Political Instability in Zimbabwe.' Council for Foreign Relations, Centre for Preventive Action, March 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Scarnecchia, 'Rationalising *Gukurahundi*: Cold War and South African Foreign Relations with Zimbabwe, 1981-1983.' *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 37, November 2011, pp.87-103.

<sup>6</sup> 'Gukurahundi: Mugabe innocent, Mphoko.' [www.zimbabwesituation.com/news/zimsit-m-gukurahundi-mugabe-innocent-mphko](http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/news/zimsit-m-gukurahundi-mugabe-innocent-mphko) Accessed on 02/03/2015.

<sup>7</sup> Ward 2015...

<sup>8</sup> Ward 2015.

<sup>9</sup> David Moore, 'Inaugural Lecture-Coercion, consent and the construction of capitalism in Africa: development studies, political economy, politics and the 'Dark Continent.' " *Transformation*, 84, 2014, PP.106-130.

<sup>10</sup> 'We won't kneel to West-President.' *The Herald*, 16 March 2015. A Chief Inspector of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), has already promised the Nigeria that whenever it has elections the ZRP is ready to 'deal with the notorious Boko Haram.' 'ZRP expresses readiness to face Boko Haram.' *News Day* 12 March 2015.

<sup>11</sup> B.Raftopoulos, 'Zimbabwean Politics in the Post- 2013 Election Period: The Constraints of Victory.' Solidarity Peace Trust, Johannesburg, June 2014.

<sup>12</sup> International Monetary Fund, 'Statement at the End of an IMF Staff Visit to Conduct the First Review of Zimbabwe's Staff-Monitored Programme.' No. 15/101, 9 March 2015.

<sup>13</sup> 'Major changes to Constitution coming.' *The Sunday Mail*, 8 March 2015.

<sup>14</sup> C.Alden and D.Large, 'China's Exceptionalism and the Challenge of Delivering Difference in Africa.' *Journal of Contemporary China*, 20,68, 2011, pp. 21-38.

<sup>15</sup> C.K.Lee, 'The Spectre of Global China,' *New Left Review*, 83, September/October 2014.

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