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Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's rip-off poll

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BY a vote of 1.69 million for Robert Mugabe to 1.28 million for Morgan Tsvangirai, the people of Zimbabwe re-elected the Zimbabwe African National Union (Zanu) president in early March. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), founded in September 1999, lost by more than in the last national election, in June 2000 when Zanu gained a small majority of parliamentary seats.

We want to make seven brief points about the election. But to set the tone, here are the words of a young, organic radical activist, Hopewell Gumbor: "What went wrong? There has been massive violence prior to the elections AND AS A RESULT THE ELECTION COULD NOT HAVE BEEN FREE AND FAIR. Mugabe survived on an anti-imperialist rhetoric and the land crisis notwithstanding the violence campaign... Mugabe's rhetoric separated the urban poor from the rural poor. This is one important reality that must be interrogated. The answer to the MDC loss lies in the explanation of that massive discrepancy. But Mugabe was not genuine in his rhetoric. He announced a retreat from the IMF while he went on to privatise education and other services but manages to get the rural vote on a land ticket that results in violent farm invasions and occupations followed by a fast track resettlement program."

– The election: Mugabe stole this one. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network-mainly progressive human rights monitors-listed the following obvious pre-poll violations: disenfranchising voters through the voter registration process; registration of voters beyond 3 March 2002; "correcting" the voters' roll; control of voter education through the Electoral Supervisory Commission; drawing election supervisors and monitors from the Ministries of Defence, Home Affairs, and Education; disallowing postal voting [i.e. preventing around a million votes from Zimbabweans abroad, which would have mainly gone to the MDC]; constituency-based voting [i.e., preventing voters from casting their ballots no matter where they happen to be within Zimbabwe]; simultaneous holding of municipal and Presidential elections; restrictions concerning the accompanying of ballot boxes; printing of extra ballot papers; very restrictive and oppressive Public Order and Security Act; unequal access to the state controlled media, in particular the broadcast media, with a bias toward the ruling party; restrictions concerning both local and international observers; confiscation and destruction of identity cards by youths of the ruling party [i.e. preventing people from voting because an ID is required at the ballot box]; establishment of illegal road blocks by youths of the ruling party; political violence, including torture and murders, largely perpetrated by ruling party supporters against members and supporters of the opposition; and selective enforcement of the law by law enforcement agents.

Then on the days of the election, March 9 and 10, urban Zimbabweans were confronted with drastic cutbacks in polling stations, requiring many hours of queuing in the hot sun. Rural voters witnessed a systematic refusal by the government to allow independent monitors near the booths, and opposition party electoral agents were unable to reach nearly half the stations, in part because of pro-Zanu thuggery. Across Zimbabwe, the government refused to abide by an urgent court order to extend voting for another day, opened only the polling booths in greater Harare (and five hours late at that), and then chased those still in long queues away at the end of the day.

– "Free and fair"? Through such tactics, we believe, easily more than 410,000 votes were stolen. Most international election monitors-with the notable exception of ruling-party ministers from neighbouring countries, the Organization of African Unity, and 50 official observers from South Africa-recognized this, declaring the poll unfree and unfair.

But the reports from countries of the North played into Zanu's hands. Mugabe has been quick to point to imperialist hypocrisy, the stolen election in the U.S., and the lack of genuine choice in most rich countries. In contrast, the state-owned media welcomed the Southern African Development Community's ministerial task force, which claimed, "Despite reported incidents of pre-election violence and some logistical shortcomings during voting... the elections were substantially free and fair, and were a true reflection of the will of the people of Zimbabwe." The South African

observer delegation, led by businessman Sam Mutsuenyane, called Mugabe's declaration of victory "legitimate." So too did the South African Federated Chamber of Commerce, leading to instant discredit and shame in Johannesburg.

And so it would seem that the elections have been stitched up through the revival of a colonial racial antagonism. Not quite, though. There were two dissenting voices from Africa, the most important being the SADC-Parliamentary Forum, a group of parliamentarians (not ministers) from the SADC region. Their conclusion was rather different: "The climate of insecurity obtaining in Zimbabwe since the 2000 parliamentary elections was such that the electoral process could not be said to adequately comply with the Norms and Standards for Elections in the SADC region." The Commonwealth observer mission said much the same. But all eyes have subsequently turned to Thabo Mbeki, and for good reason.

– Pretoria's pressure points In 1976, Mugabe's immediate predecessor, Ian Smith, was summoned to meet John Vorster and Henry Kissinger in Pretoria to be told that his position was untenable. Smith resisted the inevitable with a mix of ineffectual concessions and heightened repression, but the power that South Africa held over imports and exports was decisive.

There now appears an analogous moment of truth. Again, millions of black Zimbabweans suffer the depredations of an undemocratic, exploitative ruling elite. Again, a militaristic state serves the class interests of a few tens of thousands of well-connected bureaucrats, military and paramilitary leaders, and what are termed "briefcase businessmen," in the context of unprecedented economic crisis.

In this context of striking parallels, South African president Thabo Mbeki is taking advantage of temporary Western goodwill-aside from doubts about his genocidal HIV/AIDS policies-to offset the overall haemorrhaging of his country and continent. His New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) follows similar South African interventions in the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and a host of other international forums. The fly in the ointment, inevitably, is Mugabe.

– Pretoria's calculations: Pretoria's Zimbabwe schizophrenia has several other crucial domestic features that outweigh the pro-Western logic of Nepad, though. Looking north, the ANC leadership must despair at the following: a liberation movement that won resounding electoral victories against a terribly weak opposition, but under circumstances of worsening abstentionism by, and depoliticisation of, the masses; that movement's undeniable failure to deliver a better life for most of the country's low-income people, while material inequality soared; rising popular alienation from, and cynicism about, nationalist politicians, as the gulf between rulers and the ruled widened inexorably and as numerous cases of corruption and poor governance were brought to public attention; growing economic misery as neo-liberal policies were tried and failed; and the sudden rise of an opposition movement based in the trade unions, quickly backed by most of civil society, the liberal petit-bourgeoisie, and the independent media-potentially leading to the election of a new, post-nationalist government. The last bullet, fired in Zambia in 1991 when Kenneth Kaunda lost by a landslide, and misfired in Zimbabwe this week thanks to Mugabe's electoral theft, is not yet loaded in South Africa. But it will be.

Pretoria bureaucrats argue that there is no alternative to constructive engagement with Mugabe. The mid-1990s Nigerian lesson-"We got our fingers burned"-was chillingly instructive. After talking tough to Sani Abacha's military regime, South African officials believed that Western countries would crack down with sanctions, especially on oil. The West didn't, leaving Pretoria exposed and ineffective. Another lesson was more current: when Zambia and Madagascar conducted profoundly flawed elections last December, leading to active (ongoing) civil-society and party-political protests, the West and Pretoria quickly accepted prevailing power relations.

For Mbeki, it would be ideal if Mugabe changes his stripes immediately, reverting to his early-mid-1990s neo-liberal mode. A successful Nepad requires Mugabe to act more politely, begin to repay U.S.\$1+ billion arrears to the Bretton

Woods Institutions, and refrain from detaining and torturing journalists and opposition party members. But none of this is likely, especially if Mugabe's downward spiral of economic degradation and political illegitimacy continues. What, then, can Mbeki do?

– Pretoria's next gambit: As we write (15 March), South African vice president Jacob Zuma has been meeting for many hours in Harare, trying to stitch together a band-aid solution prior to next Tuesday's crucial London meeting of Commonwealth leaders. Zuma will reportedly ask Mugabe to step down soon, perhaps handing power to his ally Emmerson Mnangagwa, the parliamentary leader who is trusted only a little within Zanu and not at all in the opposition. Mugabe is probably unwilling to accept.

The other option, which is also being pushed by elites of all stripes, from Mbeki/Zuma to Tony Blair in London to Tony Leon (South Africa's white opposition leader) in Cape Town, is a Government of National Unity in Harare.

But notwithstanding the possible offer of a vice-presidential job, Tsvangirai publicly rejected a deal on Thursday: "This is not about appointing people to certain positions without first achieving stability. Mugabe cannot buy legitimacy by forming a government of national unity with the MDC." The political cul-de-sac that Pretoria now faces, looking north, probably compels Mbeki to vaguely endorse Mugabe's theft. But a disincentive also looms: if Mbeki legitimises Mugabe, Nepad will be denounced as illegitimate.

– Pretoria's progressive opposition: Civil society groups across Africa-e.g., the Africa Social Forum network of social movements, which met in both Bamako, Mali and Porto Alegre, Brazil in January, which includes the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development-have already denounced Mbeki's neo-liberal, "good governance" plan for Africa.

By endorsing Mugabe, Mbeki invites active protests against both Nepad's hypocrisy on governance, as well as its reliance upon Western markets and Washington-Consensus economic policies. Locations will include the upcoming (June) G-8 Meeting in rural Canada, the Africa Union launch in July in Pretoria, and the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in August.

How much good these protests do depends upon how advocates of social justice in Zimbabwe read the power relations, the importance they give international solidarity in the coming struggle for democracy, and the extent to which their comrades across the world can educate and mobilize.

– Self-activity of the Zimbabwean masses: But at home, what will democratic activists in Zimbabwe do, in response? So far, aside from a threatened national strike by the trade unions (foiled by police disruption of their planning meeting), the gut reaction seems to be hunkering down to overcome the shock of what many term the "mugging." Activists are overcome with exhaustion, intimidation, the arrest of more than a thousand civil-society election monitors last weekend, and the sheer challenge of going up against the repressive arms of the state. Army and police are patrolling the Harare ghettos and the mood of fear and loathing is palpable.

At this crucial juncture, leadership appears to be lacking. The left-of-centre NGO network group called Crisis in Zimbabwe has called upon the people "to register their concern in accordance with the Constitution," with no details. A similar group, the National Constitutional Assembly, will arrange protests "in coming weeks." Tsvangirai has withdrawn into his politburo to consult, after making a wishy-washy statement of pale defiance. Opposition lawyers, convinced that in theory they have a watertight case to re-hold the elections, are pessimistic. Given how Mugabe has stacked the judiciary, it is likely that the high court will rule in favour of Zanu.

So the last words go to activist Hopewell Gumbo: "The MDC-rising from anti-IMF working class movement-moved to the right at the alarm of most of its supporters. Tsvangirai showed inconsistencies in his program. One was

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pronouncing mass action, and the following day talking of the courts. Zimbabwe has had a number of alternatives to the process of dealing with the entrenched dictatorship of Mugabe. This is for now the most progressive way to look at the situation. We must bury behind our backs the loss and seek to invoke those alternatives that have so far not been utilized."

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