

ZIMBABWE: TIME FOR AN END TO THE ELECTORAL ROAD

The April 2004 elections pose tough questions for the MDC, ZCTU. The choices made now will have massive consequences. We suggest a way forward.

UP FROM UNDER

In 1999, the class struggle in Zimbabwe was at an all-time high. An ongoing series of general strikes in the private and State sectors had shaken the State apparatus headed by Robert Mugabe and the ZANU-PF machine. The union movement, centred on the ZCTU, was numbered among the ten fastest growing worldwide. Riots in urban townships, a farm workers strike of unprecedented scale and success, a militant student union, ZINASU, and protests by war veterans crippled the neo-liberal Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) that had been in place since 1991. The SAP - championed by a ZANU-PF in office since 1980 - was quietly abandoned by the end of 1997.

These events, reported in *Zabalaza*, and its predecessor, *Workers Solidarity*, were immensely inspiring, and were part of a broader upsurge of class struggle in South Africa, Swaziland, and Zambia. The possibility of a post-neo-liberal and post-nationalist Zimbabwe seemed very real. ZANU-PF was widely reviled, corruption scandals well known. The party's hold on power seemed shaky. What was, in practice, a one-party State, seemed doomed: throughout southern Africa, popular movements were toppling postcolonial rulers, and Zimbabwe seemed next in line. In 1999, the ZCTU, ZINASU, the National Constitutional Assembly, NGO, and others, began a process that led to the formation of a very popular "Movement for Democratic Change" (MDC). Then, in early 2000, ZANU-PF lost a popular referendum on changing the constitution.

HOW THE REST WAS LOST

The game seemed up, yet over the next five years, ZANU-PF has made itself more unassailable than ever. Several factors have led to this outcome, but foremost must be counted the ruthlessness and cynicism of the regime, coupled with the hopeless politics of Zimbabwe opposition. In 1997, the regime co-opted the war veterans' groups with a massive "pensions" payoff totalling US\$350 million. In 2000, after the referendum and just before the mid-year elections in which the MDC made its first appearance, the regime launched its invasion of 1,600 White-owned commercial farms. Orchestrated through the police, army, and Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), the actual seizures

were led by a motley coalition of self-described "war veterans," ZANU-PF officials, and CIO men. The operations were simple: a group of unemployed people would be bussed onto a farm; farm workers and landowners were driven off; actual ownership of the land passed to the leaders; and small plots and some food were given to the loyal elements of the "resettled" unemployed.

This brilliant gamble achieved many things. It broke the back of the farm workers union, the largest ZCTU affiliate and the MDC's main rural outpost. It transferred vast resources to the bankrupt State, which could be used to discipline and reward followers: in a very real sense, quasi-feudal chieftaincies of the "communal" lands were replicated throughout what was once the heart of the capitalist economy. By attacking an unpopular and prominent minority, Zimbabwe's whites - many of whom were sympathetic to the MDC - the regime was able to appeal to popular racism, while making sure its land reform left the African bourgeoisie of ZANU-PF larger and wealthier. Many on the left have consistently ignored the overtly racist elements of the land invasions, yet these proved its strongest appeal.

Despite the myth - current amongst South African activists - that peasant productivity is higher than that of capitalist farmers, Zimbabwe's new rural relations were quite unable to replicate the performance of the high productivity, capital-intensive, commercial farms. This led to massive shortfalls in food output and exports, destroying a sector previously responsible for one quarter of all jobs and 35 percent of exports. The spectre of starvation led innumerable international charities to send in food aid, but this was captured by ZANU-PF (independent distribution was not permitted), and became one more tool of power: food was exchanged for ZANU-PF loyalty.

SELECTIONS AT ELECTIONS

The rural counter-revolution was coupled to a massive crack-

down on the MDC and its affiliates. Morgan Tsvangirai, former ZCTU head, and now MDC leader, was subject to two treason trials, ZINASU's Tinashe Chimedza was beaten unconscious, media was suppressed, and ZCTU and MDC meetings attacked - either by the police and army, or by "war veterans," - by now a quasi-official militia, the "green bombers." For those who have illusions in ZANU-PF's professed radicalism, the continuity with the 1980s must be noted: the Matabeleland Massacre left between 5,000 and 15,000 dead, and resulted in the dissolution of the rival ZAPU party.

Even so, the MDC won 57 of the 120 elected seats in the 2000 general elections - a further 30 seats are appointed by the president - and performed well in the 2002 presidential elections. It captured the main urban working-class constituencies, but was unable to break into the rural areas, where the bulk of the population lives. The traditional chiefs, and the "new chiefs" on the seized farms, used every means necessary to ensure ZANU-PF carried the day.

By 2005, however, the long-term effects of repression, hunger, patronage politics, vote-rigging and unremitting tyranny had helped break the MDC. ZANU-PF ended up with 78 seats, the MDC only 41, with voter turnout its lowest in years. Huddled urban crowds greeted the results in silence and resignation. While the South African government, and its regional allies in SADC continued to make fools of themselves, proclaiming the elections "free and fair," social movements in South Africa, and COSATU and the SA Communist Party, agree with Tsvangirai: the results reflect "disgusting, massive fraud."

WHERE TO NEXT?

How far Zimbabwe has come from the glory days of 1999! Repression played its role in the change, but other movements, in far more desperate circumstances, have achieved far more in far less time than the



MDC and the ZCTU. Furthermore, the 2005 elections have been characterized by substantially less repression than the previous elections, yet the MDC has done even worse.

At the heart of the problem is the absolutely pitiful politics of the MDC. While it grew from the hard-fought struggles of the popular classes, the new party never offered much. Built by unions and students and township fighters, the MDC soon became a moderate party. Direct action, which had turned the tide against Mugabe, was now on the backburner: all efforts were to be concentrated on elections. Despite the obvious fact that ZANU-PF has manipulated the electoral process since first coming into office, elections are the be-all and end-all of the MDC leaders. Strikes and demonstrations in Zimbabwe have been replaced by international fund-raising, providing obvious ammunition for ZANU-PF's "big lie" that the MDC is the tool of Tony Blair.

The struggle against neo-liberalism, which had driven the popular movements, was replaced by an MDC commitment to privatisation and cost recovery policies: in power, the MDC-led Bulawayo town council soon began to implement hated cut-offs of basic services. The shift to neo-liberalism reflected the most basic structural problem of the MDC: it was not under the control of the popular movements, and was soon hijacked by moderates who hated criticism and tried to purge the small Trotskyist ISOZ group. As a party that called itself a "united front of Zimbabweans," the MDC was unable to develop a resolutely working class and peasant programme that went beyond simply criticizing repression to champion collectivisation of resources, self-management, equality and internationalism.

The confused leaders of the MDC are quite unable to tackle the hard-nosed Mugabe and ZANU-PF. They dealt with electoral abuses in 2000 and 2002 by appealing to the courts: even though the judiciary is routinely manipulated by ZANU-PF.

They backed off from an earlier decision to boycott the 2005 elections, allowing another Mugabe gamble: a temporary

decrease in repression to win international legitimacy and, more importantly, renewed foreign aid. After the elections, Tsangirai - obviously scared of another treason trial - made vague comments about renewed popular protest, but the tradition of ongoing protest has lain dormant for years, and the MDC has no real plans to re-awaken it. This political posing is simply irresponsible: it was followed by a military occupation of the Bulawayo townships.

WAY FORWARD

As anarchists, we have, of course, no faith in elections. While we consistently supported free elections in Zimbabwe as a step forward, we stressed that only ongoing protest could achieve such a goal, and strongly opposed any participation of the popular movements in such elections. An open parliamentary system is preferable to a tyranny, but only because it is associated with an extension of rights that facilitates further struggles - not because the parliament itself is a road to revolution.

We have always taken a flexible position on the forms of struggle in Zimbabwe. In 1999, we supported the need to unite the popular movements, and also the formation of a political organisation in Zimbabwe. However, we advocated a revolutionary and anti-parliamentary body, rejecting the emerging MDC policies. In 2001, we argued that the potential for the MDC to become a "radical grassroots organisation to shake the foundations of the Zimbabwean capitalist state" had been lost. Even so, we argued the MDC must be defended against repression. In 2003, our view was that the focus had shifted to elections, and we therefore stressed the need to focus on overthrowing Mugabe. This implied that an MDC government would be better, but actually left the question of the future quite vague.

It is now clear, however, that the MDC's electoral road is at a dead-end. What future struggles take place, must take a new path if they are to achieve anything. The wave of struggle built up in the 1990s is almost exhausted, with a tangible mood of despondency has set in the popular classes. Everything points to another turning point, like that of 1999. At present, the MDC is on the eve of accepting Cabinet posts, which would be an absolute disaster.

Either the MDC is reinvented, or it must be abandoned. There are signs of dissent in the ranks - ZINASU is opposed to electoral participation, the moderate Women of Zimbabwe Arise expressed its unhappiness with Tsangirai's fumbling, and the underground Zvakwana group seems keen on protests - but these must



Zimbabwe 1997 - cops clash with workers

come to something.

BUILDING TOMORROW

It is time for reflection and reassessment, a period that must give rise to a new direction, or accept another 20 years of misery. Our opinion is that elections must be abandoned. It is necessary to go back to the streets in protest, both against repression and against poverty. The precise form of protests cannot be decided in advance, but the use of the general strike must be seriously considered. The protest movement must reject the political party model of organising, and centre, instead, on self-organisation, mandates and delegates, and self-activity and self-education. Only such a movement will have the resilience to tackle ZANU-PF, survive its inevitable retaliation, and create new and better relations between the people.

It is necessary, also, to have a programme that can inspire the masses. It must offer something more than an exchange of Mugabe's iron fist for Tsangirai's bumbling hands. It must champion important demands - abolition of the chieftaincy, job security, social welfare, political freedoms, reindustrialisation - and foster a project of creating a post-capitalist, self-managed society, based on horizontal control of the communities and workplaces by those who live and work in them in place of just changing the faces at the top. It must link the fight against neo-liberalism and tyranny in Zimbabwe to similar fights in neighbouring countries. That is the basis for a united front of the oppressed classes, the water of struggle that will nourish the tree of freedom.



Note: We are looking for Zimbabwe correspondents - please contact us through the addresses at the back of this magazine.