

Zimbabwe: Referendum defeat for Mugabe shakes Zanu-PF government

By Barbara Slaughter and Stuart Nolan
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Last week voters in Zimbabwe rejected the new constitution being proposed by President Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF). In a result that surprised most commentators, the vote was 578,000 in favour of the new constitution and 697,754 against. Turnout was low at just over 20 percent. Voters in the cities, like Harare and Bulawayo, voted No by three to one, whilst in the rural heartlands that were expected to vote Yes there were widespread abstentions.

Mugabe has declared that he will "abide by the will of the people". In an interview on the BBC, a spokesman for Zanu-PF said of the Mugabe presidency, "He shall rule this country for as long as he likes." But the vote was a huge blow to the party that has ruled Zimbabwe since independence in 1980.

In recent years there has been widespread opposition to Mugabe's authoritarian rule. Taking place in the run-up to parliamentary elections in April, the No vote in the referendum has been widely interpreted as a plebiscite on the Zanu-PF government and Mugabe's leadership.

Zimbabwe faces an unprecedented economic and social crisis. Unemployment is over 50 percent and inflation stands at 60 percent. A fuel crisis is crippling industry and agriculture. Spending on education and health has been slashed. In a situation where at least one-quarter of the population is infected with HIV/Aids, the cost of medical care nearly doubled last year. A report issued in 1999 by the Central Statistical Office estimated that 76 percent of Zimbabwe's population live in poverty, which is "widespread and severe, with a high degree of inequality, even by regional standards".

In contrast to the suffering of the vast majority of Zimbabwe's population, Mugabe recently awarded massive pay rises of up to 300 percent to MPs and cabinet ministers. Local headmen and tribal chiefs, on whom his regime relies, were given even larger awards of between 500 and 750 percent.

The result of the referendum was, however, greatly influenced by external factors. Among Western governments and financial institutions there is growing hostility to Mugabe's rule, and efforts to destabilise his government or, at the very least, whip it into line. The International Monetary Fund suspended funding for Zimbabwe in November last year. All the major banks soon followed suit. Only US\$34 million of the US\$193 million credit facility from the IMF has been extended to the country so far.

Throughout the 1990s, Mugabe's government accepted IMF conditions, restructuring the economy and attacking living standards by slashing public spending. Last year the South African *Mail and Guardian* described his fiscal policies as "Thatcherite." The paper said he was taking the "IMF approved way out".

However the regime's corruption and nepotism acted as an impediment to the interests of international investors and brought it into increasing conflict with the IMF and Western governments. Zanu-PF continually interfered with the activities of international corporations bidding for contracts in Zimbabwe. In 1998 the *Mail and Guardian* said the government was "usurping the powers of its tender board regarding a huge digital telecomms project for Matabeleland, a move which may have negative repercussions on international donor funding for similar projects". In an article in the February 16 *Financial Times*, Minister of State at the British Foreign Office Peter Haine demanded a commitment to "sound economic policies of modernisation of bloated, inefficient, state-owned enterprises".

The IMF justified its suspension of funding on the grounds that fiscal targets for the end of September had not been met, i.e., the public expenditure cuts Mugabe had made were not deep enough. Another reason given for the suspension of IMF funds was the secret financing of Zimbabwe's intervention into the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), not declared to the IMF. The IMF was trying to give an "ethical" cover for its punitive actions against the Zimbabwean economy, despite the fact that the most recent release of funds contained a clause allowing Mugabe to spend an agreed amount of his budget on the Congo war. The United States and British governments have also attacked Zimbabwe's involvement in the war.

The war involves expenditure on 11,000 troops and is a huge logistical operation. Mugabe intervened on behalf of Zimbabwean business interests, who wanted to get control of the vast mining operations—diamonds, copper and cobalt—in the DRC, and to prevent the regional expansion of Ugandan influence. Initial interventions by Rwanda and Uganda into the DRC were supported by the United States and it is likely that Zimbabwe was encouraged to intervene on behalf of the Kabila regime by British and French business interests in the region. With the danger that the war in the Congo could destabilise all of sub-Saharan Africa, however, Western governments have backed a United Nations peace deal that calls on Zimbabwe and all other countries to withdraw.

Whilst official British policy has been increasingly vocal against Mugabe and sympathetic to his opponents, there are still powerful British interests close to his regime. Eighteen British officers are employed in training the Zimbabwean army and it was pressure from the British military that led to the recent delivery of spare parts for the country's Hawk jets.

The proposed constitutional change was Mugabe's authoritarian response to the crisis facing his regime. Zanu-PF's propaganda declared that the new constitution was a final break with colonialism. Invoking Mugabe's national liberation credentials, they said that the

No voters were "sell-out Zimbabweans" who wanted to retain a colonial-style constitution.

The main provision of the draft constitution was to strengthen Mugabe's grip on the presidency. Under the present constitution he should step down in two years time, when his current term expires. The proposed change would have limited future presidents to two terms, but as it was not retroactive, Mugabe could have stood for another two terms. The draft constitution would also have made his government and military officials immune from prosecution for any illegal acts committed while in office.

Mugabe added a clause empowering the government to seize land held by white farmers, demanding that the British government pay compensation. This was a ploy to win the support of the rural masses, whose land was stolen during the colonial era. The voters did not believe him, however. Since independence, and despite the enormous sacrifices made in the struggle against British colonial rule, the land redistribution promised has not materialised. More than 6 million black Zimbabweans are crowded into barren communal areas. The few transfers that have taken place have gifted the most fertile land to Zanu-PF officials and their relatives.

The government's Constitutional Commission presented draft constitutional proposals to Mugabe at the end of November. But it is indicative of the factionalism in Zanu-PF that even this hand-picked body proposed Mugabe should step down and become a "ceremonial president", with power passing to an elected prime minister. A secret meeting held between the presiding judge and Zanu-PF officials deleted the offending clause and inserted one retaining Mugabe's executive powers. The doctored report, presented to a full meeting of the Commission the following day, was pushed through without a vote, leading to protests and threats of resignation by some Commissioners.

Two Commissioners appealed to the High Court, in an attempt to get the referendum delayed because of the alleged illegality of the alterations to the draft. The presiding judge declared that Mugabe had powers under the Referendums Act to make "any corrections, clarifications, alterations or amendments to the draft constitution he so wishes.... he could even have discarded it completely and put his own draft before the electorate."

After the production of the draft, the Commission was legally required to disband. Instead, Mugabe kept the Commissioners on and transformed them into a campaign team for a Yes vote. Angry crowds attended public meetings organised by the Commission, jeering and booing the speakers. Some meetings ended in chaos. Chairman of the Commission, Justice Godfrey Chidyaisiku, attempted to address a public meeting in Harare last Monday, but was driven out by large, hostile crowds. Other meetings could not go ahead due to mass hostility.

In his address to last December's Zanu-PF party congress, Mugabe's spoke of behind-the-scenes "machinations" and "conspiracies". He feared that the constitutional reform process, began as a bulwark against the opposition and to protect the system of patronage, was taking a different form—a move against him from within his own party. Debates in parliament degenerated into threats between factions.

An article entitled "Contenders eye Mugabe's throne" appeared in the *Zimbabwe Independent*. It claimed that confrontations between "Zanu-PF heavyweights" were polarising politburo meetings. Soon after, a Zanu-PF "mini congress" to re-elect the politburo was postponed to prevent infighting before the April general election.

These conflicts inside Zanu-PF are not about the path to a "democratic Zimbabwe", but what new forms of political rule can maintain the present regime. Mugabe is considered by some to be the only force capable of holding the government together, while others believe he is setting the stage for the party's downfall.

During the referendum campaign Mugabe utilised the colonial Law & Order Maintenance Act, enacted under Ian Smith's repressive white Rhodesian State. It has been used to break up demonstrations, violently intimidate opposition meetings and arrest journalists and opposition activists without charge.

Aside from dissenters within Zanu-PF, the main political opposition facing Mugabe—the forces he identifies as "sell-out Zimbabweans"—are those groups gathered around the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA). The NCA has claimed the referendum vote as a victory for its anti-Mugabe stance.

Formed in 1997 to review the Zimbabwean constitution, the NCA is a coalition of opposition parties, churches, Non-government Organisations (NGOs) and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). It represents those sections of the ruling elite in Zimbabwe who fear that Zanu-PF is endangering their business interests. Its political agenda is directly shaped by the demands of the World Bank, the IMF and the Western powers.

It is significant that the NCA launched its constitutional review the same year that the IMF first suspended loans to Zimbabwe and demanded more "transparent government". This was at the same time that the ZCTU leadership launched a series of strikes and protests against the government and began to formulate a pro-IMF programme with the employers' organisations. Calls for an elected prime minister and the abolition of the president's executive powers are made from the standpoint of establishing "transparency" in government—a euphemism most often employed to ensure regimes are answerable to the demands of international finance capital.

The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was formed late last year to oppose Zanu-PF in the upcoming parliamentary elections. It is headed by Morgan Tsvangirai, ZCTU secretary general, and Gibson Sibandi, ZCTU's national secretary. Both men were leaders of the NCA and resigned to head the new party. Tsvangirai has made clear that his organisation supports the "free market" and the IMF's structural adjustment programme. His complaint is only about the way the programme has been administered: "At the stage we had reached, some form of structural adjustment was needed. The general vote is thumbs down for structural adjustment. But it's a failure of administration, not policy. It's a failure of administration, not strategy. We had to relax and open up and allow business to operate without these constraints."

According to leaked reports in the *Zimbabwe Independent*, Tsvangirai has agreed that a "social contract" he is proposing would contain a wage freeze, substantial increases in productivity, the privatisation of state industries and price increases on basic food stuffs. This is in marked contrast to his populist declarations at ZCTU protest rallies against price and fuel increases.

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