

Tensions rise as Zimbabwe's economy implodes

By Stephan McCoy
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President Emmerson Mnangagwa's ZANU-PF government faces mounting opposition as economic and social tensions rise.

Zimbabwe's currency is in free fall, with inflation running at 800 percent, leading to severe food, fuel, medicine, and currency shortages.

With salaries worth just 10 percent of what they were two years ago, poverty has risen by a third. More than 70 percent of the population live below the poverty line and 34 percent live in extreme poverty. Power outages and water shortages compound their misery.

The income required for a family of five to obtain "both food and non-food items" has risen by 33 percent over this year, making many basic goods out of reach for most Zimbabweans. The food poverty line, in a country that was once the continent's breadbasket, has reached 40 percent.

Zimbabwe has recorded just under 5,000 confirmed cases of the coronavirus, and over 120 deaths. This is believed to be a significant underestimate, with some of the country's leading figures becoming infected, including several legislators and Mnangagwa's son.

The healthcare system, already limited and starved of resources, is on its knees, struggling to respond to the pandemic which is disrupting other healthcare services.

Fifteen thousand nurses, at the forefront of the struggle against the pandemic, have been on strike for nearly two months, vowing not to return to work—despite government threats and intimidation—until their demands for personal protective equipment (PPE) and the payment of their wages in US dollars are met. Their lives are being put at risk by the lack of PPE.

On July 28, the Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights said that 200 health workers had tested positive for COVID-19. According to *CGTN Africa*, at least 10 percent of confirmed cases are healthcare workers, with the total number of infected healthcare

workers reaching 480.

Nurses began their strike over two months ago and have periodically been joined by doctors. The government employer, the Health Services Board, has declared the strike illegal and taken the striking nurses off the payroll. Last month, 13 nurses and union representatives were arrested in Harare after they staged a demonstration demanding better wages and working conditions.

Despite the widespread poverty and the nurses' strike, the ZANU-PF government has agreed to pay \$3.5 billion to more than 4,000 white farmers evicted from their land after 2000, in a bid to placate US and European imperialism. To fund the interest payments on the bond, the government is considering selling an international bond, using commodity exports such as gold, diamonds and platinum, and municipal land around the nation's biggest cities.

Mnangagwa appointed his vice-president, Constantino Chiwenga, as health minister after being forced to sack the previous minister, Obadiah Moyo, due to corruption in the awarding of a \$20 million contract for COVID-19 testing kits. The corruption was exposed by investigative journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, who is now in prison facing charges of inciting violence against the government. Moyo was arrested and is awaiting trial.

According to *Bloomberg*, relations between Mnangagwa and Chiwenga are acrimonious, which is why he has now been given the poisoned chalice of the health ministry. Mnangagwa accused Chiwenga during a "heated exchange" in a politburo meeting of attempting to use the July 31 protests to embarrass him. Chiwenga, a former general with strong support in the military, is seen as a possible rival for the presidency.

While Chiwenga played a prominent role in the 2017 coup that ousted longtime ruler Robert Mugabe and brought Mnangagwa to power, Mnangagwa has attempted to undermine his influence by reassigning those seen as

being loyal to Chiwenga to other posts or outside the country.

Such is the economic turmoil that last June, in an unprecedented move, the Joint Operations Command (JOC) made up of officials from the military, police and secret service, intervened to order the closure of the stock exchange and to ban large mobile-money transfers in a bid to avert collapse. Military leaders denied they were planning a coup.

Mnangagwa's accusations come after Zimbabwe's Central Intelligence Organisation seized fliers from the home of Cleveria Chizema, a member of ZANU-PF's politburo, denigrating him and calling for ZANU-PF supporters to join the opposition protest on July 31, while praising Chiwenga. ZANU-PF has now suspended Chizema for plotting against Mnangagwa.

According to *Africa Confidential*, several within this group are in favour of either Chiwenga or General Sibusiso Moyo taking over from Mnangagwa in a palace coup and the formation of a National Transitional Authority, including opposition Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A) leader Nelson Chamisa, who lost the widely criticised 2018 election to Mnangagwa.

The euphoria that accompanied Mnangagwa's ouster of his longtime ally Mugabe in a military coup, when he advanced himself as the strongman required to restore order necessary and secure international investment, soon evaporated. His August 2018 election victory was marred by allegations of irregularities and the killing of at least six protesters. A few months later, his government deployed the army to suppress protests over the deteriorating economic conditions, killing at least 18 people.

The imperialist powers imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe in 2003, targeting specific individuals and 56 companies and other organisations, making it difficult for Zimbabwe to obtain loans. They initially backed Mnangagwa in the hope of weaning him off relations with China. Beijing had for decades supported Mugabe, investing heavily in the country's extractive industries, agriculture, telecoms, and hydropower.

Earlier this month, the US Treasury sanctioned Mnangagwa's wealthy business ally Kudakwashe Tagwirei, chief executive of Sakunda Holdings and majority owner of Landela Mining Ventures. He is widely seen as a proxy for Mnangagwa, whose personal fortune is estimated at \$500 million, thanks to his stakes in several banks, mines, agribusiness, and transport

companies.

This indicates that any international loan will be dependent upon clearing out the corrupt circle of plutocrats around Mnangagwa, including the president himself. Mnangagwa has accused Washington and the major powers of inciting the opposition to his government.

In the wake of the attempted coup, the government reimposed lockdown restrictions and flooded the streets of the capital Harare with police and military to prevent the July 31 protests over the deteriorating economic situation. The protests had been called by the MDC-A, which seeks to normalize Zimbabwe's relations with the imperialist powers, and some smaller oppositional parties.

The security forces used checkpoints and roadblocks set up during the COVID-19 lockdown to stop protesters reaching the city. At least 60 people were arrested, including novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga and MDC-A spokesperson, Fadzayi Mahere.

This followed the arrest of around 100 oppositionists, journalists, and other prominent critics in recent weeks. Journalist Hopewell Chin'ono was one of the protest's organisers and has spent the last four weeks in prison on charges of inciting public violence. Last week, he appeared in court to make his third appeal for bail wearing leg irons.

While the magistrate ordered the removal of his leg irons, he refused to allow his claims about the harsh treatment he has received in jail—including lack of warm clothing, suitable food for his medical condition, and personal protective equipment—to be heard in public because it could “jeopardize prison security.”

Lawyers say that Transform Zimbabwe party leader Jacob Ngarivhume has reported similar treatment and has been denied bail twice.

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