



JANUARY 2009

COUNTRY SUMMARY

Zimbabwe

The brutal response of President Robert Mugabe and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) to their loss in general elections in March 2008 plunged Zimbabwe deep into political turmoil. After a month's delay in releasing the results of the presidential poll, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission declared that opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) leader Morgan Tsvangirai had failed to win by a 50-percent-plus-one vote majority, necessitating a run-off on June 27.

ZANU-PF launched a campaign of violence against MDC activists and supporters, mobilizing a system of repression and violent intimidation that remained in place, if less overtly active, at the end of the year. The months leading up to the run-off were marked by widespread abuses, including killings, torture, beatings, looting, and burning of property. Perpetrators, including the police, military, and local ZANU-PF officials, as well as government-backed militia and war veterans, committed abuses with almost absolute impunity. At least 163 people were killed and some 5,000 were tortured or beaten. Tens of thousands more were displaced by the violence, which eventually forced Tsvangirai to withdraw from the poll, leaving Mugabe to declare himself the winner.

In September, in the face of international pressure and a severely weakened economy, Mugabe signed a power-sharing agreement with Tsvangirai under the mediation of then-president Thabo Mbeki of South Africa. However, the frailty of the deal was soon apparent as the parties rapidly reached a deadlock on the distribution of ministries, with violence and intimidation against the MDC still taking place. Zimbabwe's political situation remains precarious, and the future looks bleak if the political leadership does not end abuses and address accountability for both past and present abuses.

Post-Election Violence and Repression

The build up to the March elections was generally peaceful, despite some flaws in the electoral process. However, the months afterwards were marked by a well planned and systematic campaign of violence by ZANU-PF and its allies. In an attempt to overturn the vote in the presidential run-off, government-backed militia and war veterans, ZANU-PF officials and supporters, and senior military officers waged a vicious campaign of intimidation against MDC activists and suspected supporters. Entire villages were cordoned off and those suspected of having voted for the MDC were brutally beaten and tortured. The militia and war veterans beat, tortured, and mutilated suspected MDC activists, supporters, and their family members in hundreds of base camps—many of them army bases—established across the provinces as local operation centers. Thousands of people were forced to attend abusive “re-education” meetings. Suspected ZANU-PF supporters and militia targeted and killed up to 163 MDC activists.

In an effort to subvert the run-off electoral process and instill fear in election officials and observers, police arrested more than 100 presiding officers and election officials on politically motivated charges of electoral fraud. Police also arrested hundreds of MDC supporters and officials on spurious charges of inciting violence, while ZANU-PF supporters, who were responsible for the majority of the violence, were allowed to carry out abuses with almost absolute impunity.

Impunity and the Rule of Law

Zimbabwe’s long history of impunity for politically motivated crimes has worsened the political crisis. Those who committed past abuses have remained free to carry out further violence and other crimes. Since 2000 the government has led an onslaught on the judiciary that has included physical and verbal attacks against judges and bribes intended to compromise the impartiality and undermine the work of the judiciary.

Law enforcement agencies have subverted the rule of law. The police are responsible for widespread violations, including harassment, threats, and violence against opposition supporters and human rights activists, as well as torture and other

mistreatment. Police have routinely refused to take action against ZANU-PF supporters and militia implicated in political violence.

Public confidence in the judiciary and police—especially regarding independence and impartiality—is eroded. There have been no investigations into the role of senior government, military, and ruling party officials implicated in mobilizing and inciting militia forces responsible for election-related violence.

Human Rights Defenders

The violence in the aftermath of the general elections created an even more challenging environment for human rights defenders. Many NGOs are perceived by the government of Zimbabwe as being aligned to the MDC. In the capital Harare, the government clampdown forced several NGOs to shut down. In the months after March elections, police raided the offices of NGOs such as the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition and the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN). ZANU-PF supporters attacked hundreds of ZESN election observers, forcing many to flee their homes. Human rights defenders were intimidated and threatened by police and security agents, who in May and June arrested a number of activists, including a prominent human rights lawyer and 13 members of the NGO Women of Zimbabwe Arise.

Humanitarian Crisis

Zimbabwe's humanitarian crisis shows no signs of ending, with more than 1.3 million Zimbabweans living with HIV, and millions of people facing ever more severe food shortages. According to the United Nations, nearly half the population will need food aid in 2009 and the contamination of water sources has resulted in cholera outbreaks. In June 2008 the government exacerbated the humanitarian situation by banning the operations of all local and international humanitarian agencies throughout the country. Despite lifting the ban in September, the government has tightened control over agency operations. To operate in a specific area, NGOs must obtain permission and a memorandum of understanding from the relevant government ministry. Restrictive government controls have left the delivery of humanitarian assistance open to manipulation by government agents and ZANU-PF officials. In the past, the government has used food aid as a political weapon against

opposition supporters. The new government will face the challenge of addressing the humanitarian crisis in the context of an extraordinarily weakened economy, in which inflation has soared to over 200 million percent.

Key International Actors

Previous inaction to address Zimbabwe's political crisis by regional bodies such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU) emboldened the government of Zimbabwe to turn the institutions of state even more aggressively against Zimbabweans seeking democratic change. Instead, African leaders put their faith in the mediation of Thabo Mbeki, initiated on behalf of SADC in 2007 following a widely reported incident of police brutality against Morgan Tsvangirai and other MDC officials. While this led to some improvements in the electoral process leading up to the March elections, it failed to address the root causes of Zimbabwe's political crisis—the government's systematic violation of international human rights standards.

The serious violence after the March elections finally compelled several African leaders to publicly condemn abuses, although other countries, including South Africa, initially refused to acknowledge the serious nature of the situation. Differing positions within SADC prevented it from taking concerted and decisive action. At an emergency SADC summit on April 12, leaders expressed concern about the delay in the release of the presidential results, but did little to address spiraling violence and other abuses.

As the violence intensified before the June presidential run-off, SADC and AU election observers declared that it would not be free and fair. Once again African leaders failed to take a robust approach. In June at the AU heads of state summit in Sharm-el-Sheikh, Egypt, leaders not only ignored ZANU-PF's responsibility for the widespread violence, but failed to recognize the illegitimacy of Mugabe's presidency. The summit participants issued a weak resolution calling for negotiations between the two political parties, but not mentioning the violence. To their credit, several African leaders spoke publicly in condemnation of the run-off and Mugabe's brutal actions. The leaders of Botswana and Nigeria made it clear that they did not recognize Mugabe as Zimbabwe's president.

In September Mbeki's mediation led to the MDC and ZANU-PF signing a power-sharing agreement meant to bring an end to the political crisis. However, both parties remain deadlocked over the division of ministerial positions, and there have been few efforts to address abuses or accountability. The role of SADC and the AU remains crucial in ensuring a peaceful return to the rule of law and respect for human rights, but the ongoing situation is a blot on the credibility of their commitment to an effective regional solution.

The European Union, United States, and United Kingdom have each consistently condemned the government's abusive record, and maintained travel sanctions and asset freezes against senior government and ZANU-PF officials. Despite the power-sharing agreement, EU officials have indicated that sanctions and asset freezes will remain until there is a return to democracy and marked improvement in human rights conditions. International aid to reconstruct the country is also likely to remain on hold until human rights conditions improve and democracy is restored.

The ability of the UN Security Council to address the crisis was largely nullified by China, Russia, and South Africa refusing to determine that the situation was a threat to international peace and security. Nonetheless, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on numerous occasions expressed concern and appointed UN Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Haile Menkerios as a special envoy for Zimbabwe.