

Opinions

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Briggs Bomba

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My cautious optimism for Zimbabwe's 2012 elections

Briggs Bomba

In this *Opinion*, prominent Zimbabwean civil society activist Briggs Bomba argues that 2012 could be a decisive year in Zimbabwe's recent history. A number of domestic and international factors could come together to force the regime to hold democratic elections, and the transformed international scene – with the influence of the Arab spring and the NATO-led Libyan intervention – could create an auspicious environment for the country's long-awaited transition. Bomba also insists that the continued pressure from Zimbabwe's vibrant civil society organisations is vital for the real democratisation of Zimbabwe's institutions. For any transition to become truly meaningful it 'must be completed in the hard years after democratic election'.

Introduction

I argue in this *Opinion* that there are essentially three reasons for cautious optimism in Zimbabwe today. Firstly, the fact that the 2012 elections will be President Robert Mugabe's last elections will dramatically change the shape of Zimbabwe's political scene. In this context civil society organisations in Zimbabwe are hopeful that the elections will represent a leap forward into a new era, but they are continuing to push extremely hard to ensure that the elections are conducted in an open and democratic environment. Pressure will increase on Zanu-PF to appear as a credible and democratic party. Secondly, the Electoral Reform Bill could make some valuable changes that will have a positive impact on the conduct of the elections. Lastly, the consequences of the Arab spring will pressurise Zanu-PF to open up political space, even if the signals remain extremely mixed.

President Mugabe's last election

President Mugabe, who is 88, will be participating in what will realistically be the last feasible election for him. I believe that this presents Zimbabwe with new possibilities. If he wins a new term he will be 93 years old by the time it finishes. His advanced years combined with his reported health problems make this the *grand finale* for him. Indeed, Zanu-PF's failed push for elections in 2011 – attempting to hold elections before adequate safeguards and reforms were in place – was driven by their own recognition that time is fast running out for President Mugabe to lead the party in an election, in any meaningful way.

Given how President Mugabe's person is intertwined with the character of the Zimbabwe crisis, his imminent exit from the political stage is a very significant factor with far-reaching impact on the country's politics. However, I want to make it clear that I do not believe that the protracted Zimbabwe crisis can be reduced to Mugabe's 'evil' or

'Machiavellian' character. Nor is Mugabe – as he has tried to present himself – an 'anti-imperialist figure', fighting for Zimbabwe's poor against international powers that are trying to unseat him.¹

Yet Mugabe is rightly regarded domestically and on the international stage as a major stumbling block. Riddled by factions, only Mugabe has been able to keep together Zanu-PF. A post-Mugabe Zanu-PF will be a much weaker force and incapable of continued domination over Zimbabwe's politics and national affairs. Indeed after Mugabe Zanu-PF will not have the ability to dominate critical areas and organs of the state such as control over economic resources, the security sector and social forces such as the war veterans and the rural population. Mugabe has been an important glue for the party-state with, until relatively recently, serious constituencies of rural support. In building for this eventuality the main objective for the future must be the critical importance of competitive politics and a vibrant civil society to act as a watchdog to the activities of political parties. Civil society activists have a clear vision: never again shall a single political party have unchallenged power and dominance.

Electoral reforms and shared power

My second reason for cautious optimism stems from the reform process that is currently under way in Zimbabwe. The next general election is likely to take place under improved conditions given the current constitutional reform process and both internal and external pressure for electoral change. This might seem like naive optimism to many but I do not think it is. The Zimbabwe Electoral Amendment Bill currently before parliament introduces a limited, though important number of reforms that will represent an improvement in the rules under which elections are held.

Before I go into the issues being confronted by the Bill we need to consider the circumstances of the last elections. The 2008 elections were a tragic disappointment for Zimbabweans. Parliamentary elections gave the leader of the opposition, Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change 99 seats compared to Zanu-PF's 97; a breakaway faction of the MDC led by Arthur Mutambara won ten seats and the former Zanu-PF minister Simba Makoni's organisation won eight per cent of the Presidential vote and no parliamentary seats. This gave the combined opposition a majority in the 210-seat parliament. While Zanu-PF did not reject the results of the parliamentary elections soon after, on 20 March 2008, they unleashed the bloodiest repression of any election since 1980. From April to September that year there were more than 15,000 violations of human rights and an estimated 200 murders.²

Paradoxically the 2008 elections were conducted with more openness than we had seen for years. So unlike in previous elections, there was not a widespread campaign of violence *before* the election and the MDC operated in a degree of freedom. Much of this was due to the role of the regional organisation, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), in insisting on changes to elections following mediation in 2007. SADC mediation ensured that the results from individual polling stations were posted outside the station. Even if the violent aftermath of the elections saw SADC help shore-up Mugabe's rule, the regional body was an important player in regulating the conduct of the elections in the first place. With the worst violence over by September, the Global Political Agreement (GPA) was signed by Zimbabwe's main political parties leading to a Government of National Unity in 2009. The GPA mandated the government to launch a reform process into the constitution and the conduct of elections. It was deemed vital that the legal machinery for holding elections in Zimbabwe was revisited.

I shall now explain some of the intended consequences of the current bill. It covers the legal machine governing the election, including voter registration, the voters roll, presidential elections and results, and vote recounts. The Bill is a combination of positive measures and half-hearted reforms. For example, the requirement in the Bill that the voters roll be available to political parties, candidates and the public, and also be made available online – a common practice in most democracies – is

a very valuable development. However, there are other areas that are murkier. The Bill retains the system whereby the President sets the date of elections and ministers maintain some control over the electoral processes. As the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) has stated, 'It means they are both players and referees in the same game which puts the other contestants at a disadvantage.'³ However, even with these doubts I remain confident that the election will have to be conducted with greater openness.

Serious problems, which cannot be legislated against, remain. While it is tempting to characterise government in Zimbabwe as shared power by the three main parties the reality is a continual imbalance in favour of Zanu-PF. Though the recent escalation of political violence in Zimbabwe was condemned by the leaders of the major parties in government at a joint meeting in November such initiatives are rare. There is a strong sense that Zanu-PF is responsible for the overwhelming majority of political violence. In the middle of November the organisation Crisis in Zimbabwe was clear about apportioning blame: 'the problem is that the same people who call for peace and non-violence are the same people who ululate when their people cause violence.' MDC rallies in October and November had to be cancelled because of the continual reality of violence by Zanu-PF militants. As a consequence civil society must press for the next elections to take place under conditions that reflect genuine negotiations and settlement by the main political actors and these must be on-going in 2012.

International Context

Added to this, is the changed international context which will help increase the possibility of a fairer process. The international block with the greatest leverage on Zimbabwe – SADC – has been firmer on Zimbabwe since South Africa's President Jacob Zuma won the elections in 2009. SADC refused to accept President Mugabe's earlier push for general elections in 2011, before the necessary reforms were in place. SADC's influence has played heavily on the positive delay of elections until 2012. In addition, at the SADC Heads of State meetings in Zambia in March this year, President Mugabe was warned of the risk of Egyptian-style uprisings if he failed to open up democratic space. The SADC chairperson directly warned President Mugabe that unless action was taken to address the people's grievances there was

potential for uprisings in Zimbabwe. This shift in SADC's approach may have already had a deterrent effect by curbing the worst excesses of state-sponsored political violence. South Africa, SADC and the wider international community is unlikely to ignore an attempt by the regime to suppress protests.

We should also note a new interventionist approach to international politics as shown by events in Ivory Coast and Libya (which saw UN and NATO interventions respectively). Although there is no immediate prospect for similar intervention in Zimbabwe, if there is an attempt by Zanu-PF to suppress a mass uprising this may change. President Mugabe and the Zanu-PF hierarchy have expressed clear concern that Zimbabwe could be the next target and Mugabe himself has changed his language from boasting about political violence to preaching 'peace' in what are clear efforts to avoid any justification for a potential external intervention in Zimbabwe. On 11 November after the cross-party meeting condemning political violence Mugabe explained, 'Let us walk the talk of peace. This is our sincere plea from our hearts.'¹⁴

Of course, I am cautious. Signs are mixed. The current trial of six pro-democracy activists in Harare for attending a meeting about the Arab spring in February reflects Zanu-PF's nervousness about North African-style resistance. Some details about the case will illustrate Zanu-PF's considerable paranoia about this. On 19 February, 45 people were arrested after the police stormed a meeting in Harare at the Zimbabwe Labour Centre. Participants had just watched a video about the mass popular upsurge in Egypt and Tunisia, and were holding a discussion. Though most were released, six were initially charged with treason and tortured in prison. These charges were reduced to 'seeking to overthrow the government', carrying a possible ten-year sentence. The trial is currently taking place in Harare.

While questions remain as to whether Zanu-PF and hard-line elements in the military in particular will allow a transfer of power to take place if they lose the election, there are further factors that make a power transfer likely to happen. A key element of this is the influence of events in North Africa, Ivory Coast and the most recent Zambia elections. These basic lessons are translating into what appears to be a new preparedness to 'defend the vote' through mass action. While it remains to be

seen if this attitude will go beyond rhetoric the recent fall of dictatorships in the face of mass uprisings in North Africa will likely influence similar spontaneous eruptions in Harare should the elections be blatantly stolen. The cost of rigging the next election might be deemed too high for the regime.

Action needed now: minimum conditions for a free and fair election

For democratic transformation in Zimbabwe to take place pressure and support needs to be directed at securing minimum conditions for a free and fair election. They must focus on ensuring a clean voters roll, a peaceful environment, and a credible electoral administration. Much of this pressure can come from inside the country. Zimbabwe has a very advanced grass-roots civic society with a generation of activists who have resisted the regime's abuse of human rights and democracy over the past 20 years. Numerous groups continue to work in harsh circumstances in advocacy on constitutional and electoral reforms to create the right environment for democratic elections. Practical support and solidarity is needed now, more than ever, for this kind of work to ensure constitutional reforms are carried out in time for the elections. This should not be a partisan agenda – the question of who wins elections must be left to the electorate. What is important here is the principle of democratic elections to produce a government with unquestionable legitimacy to allow the country to move forward.

Outside Zimbabwe the international community can play a role by offering practical support to achieve the best conditions for democratic elections. I believe it is important for key actors such as the US, EU and the Commonwealth to recognise their limited leverage when it comes to securing political reforms in Zimbabwe; unilateral action and grand posturing will be counterproductive. This is not to say these organisations do not have a role to play in raising concerns on the global stage about Zimbabwe's election and human rights but I believe practical results can best be achieved through multilateral action and coordination with African bodies such as SADC and the African Union at the level of individual member states.

Preparing for post-election democratic governance

We also need to think beyond the elections. As Zimbabwe approaches this defining political moment urgent attention must be directed towards institutional reforms to ensure a democratic, transparent, accountable and effective government. Sadly, there is very little focus on this highly important work. Local initiatives and grass-roots international support in this area should be escalated. One powerful example of effective international action has been the coordinated protests outside Zimbabwe's embassies and High Commissions across the world against the bogus charges levelled against the six pro-democracy activists on trial for organising the meeting described above on the Arab spring.⁵ The substance of the transformation agenda cannot be left to the post-elections period. It is vital that concerted activism by Zimbabwe's civil society organisations is directed now at the form and content of the democratic transformation process in order to avoid a false transition. Across the political divide real democrats can practically demonstrate their commitment to open government by how they conduct business. There is no reason why any ministry led by any of the Movement for Democratic Change factions or Zanu-PF should wait until after the elections to practise transparent and accountable government. Similarly, there is no reason why international donors must wait until after the elections or Mugabe's departure to support these practices across the country.

There are initiatives to allow greater and more responsible financial management, though many of these do not go far enough. I welcome provisions in the 2010 updated Public Finance Management Act where revenues collected by Government and any funds coming into the Exchequer Account are managed in an open and transparent way. But the act should be amended to ensure that parliament is guaranteed real participation in loan and debt management, ensuring that the terms and conditions of loans are openly debated.

These are vital concerns for us. The role of IMF loans and conditionality were devastating to Zimbabwe in the 1990s. The government introduced the first full Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1991, although the IMF had been pressing it to reduce expenditure and devalue the Zimbabwe dollar from the

early 1980s. The IMF insisted on trade liberalisation, the removal of import controls and export incentives, deregulation including changes to what was regarded as 'restrictive' labour legislation and widespread public sector reforms. The government pursued policies involving privatisation and the closure of state companies deemed unprofitable. The year after the implementation of the ESAP saw a huge 11 per cent fall in per capita GDP. More than 20,000 jobs were lost between January 1991 and July 1993. In 1993 unemployment had reached a record 1.3 million from a total population of about 10 million. By 1994, 25,000 civil service jobs had been lost.⁶

A new Zimbabwe must strengthen parliament's participation in the frequently 'shadowy' world of conditionality and international loans to avoid a repeat of structural adjustment on the back of international loans agreed between elites. While there are some important steps forward, these are not enough. It is only from an extension of these small but important reforms that a government that works for the people can emerge. So will the real Zimbabwean democrats please stand up?

Conclusion

Despite my natural hesitancy I believe that these three pillars – Mugabe's last election, electoral reform and the international context – will combine to make 2012's election a decisive turning point in Zimbabwe. However, we must not lapse into complacency. I have given some ideas about where we need to remain vigilant to ensure that the elections are properly and cleanly run, but I have also indicated that much work needs to be carried out to create democratic institutions that can sustain democracy in Zimbabwe deep into the 21st century.

Therefore maximum pressure and support must focus not just on initiatives for democratic elections, but also very importantly on the work to institutionalise democratic, accountable and effective government afterwards. The transition does not finish after a single election but must be filled out and completed in the hard years after that. Solidarity with the democratic movement in Zimbabwe has always been globalised, from the 1970s, when civil society organisations across the world extended support to the liberation struggle, to the campaign for democratic elections in the late 1990s. This is the time when solidarity – from the North and

South – is most needed for those on the frontlines of the democratic transformation agenda in Zimbabwe as we enter what may be the most important year in the country for a generation.

Biography

Briggs Bomba works for TrustAfrica, as coordinator of Zimbabwe Alliance, a funder-collaborative initiative that works to promote a vibrant civil society and a successful democratic transformation in Zimbabwe by supporting local initiatives through grant making, capacity building, networking and mobilising international solidarity. Briggs Bomba has years of experience working with civil society organisations in Zimbabwe and beyond. Previously Bomba served as Director of Campaigns for Africa Action in Washington, DC. He holds a Master's Degree in Social and Applied Economics from Wright State University (Ohio, USA). In the early 2000s he was a leading student activist arrested and imprisoned several times by the Zimbabwe government. He has served on the steering committees of the Zimbabwe Social Forum and Southern Africa Social Forum. A leading analyst on democracy and economic development in Africa, Mr Bomba has appeared on CNN, BBC, WorldFocus, NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, CBC, Press TV, Al-Jazeera, Voice of America, SW Radio Africa, KPFA, WPFW and the Reverend Jesse Jackson's Keeping Hope Alive radio show. His commentary and analysis has appeared in Alliance Magazine, Foreign Policy in Focus and Pambazuka News, among other

outlets.

References

- 1 There are seven recent biographies of Mugabe written in the past ten years; each promises to get to the 'man behind the monster'. Neither explanation – Mugabe as an anti-imperialist or as a monster – helps us delve into what has happened in Zimbabwe.
- 2 For a good summary, see Richard Bourne and Leo Zeilig, 'The Commonwealth and Zimbabwe' in *Policy Briefing Commonwealth Advisory Bureau*, 2011.
- 3 See the excellent report by ZESN into the Bill www.zesn.org.zw/publications/publication_296.pdf
- 4 'Mugabe and Tsvangirai slam violence in Zimbabwe' in *Action for Southern Africa*, November 2011.
- 5 The best example of such action was on 21 March this year, which was supported by an array of organisations www.socialism.com/drupal-6.8/?q=node/1632
- 6 E. Z. Razemba, *The Political Economy of Zimbabwe: Impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes, 1980-1993* (Harare, 1994).



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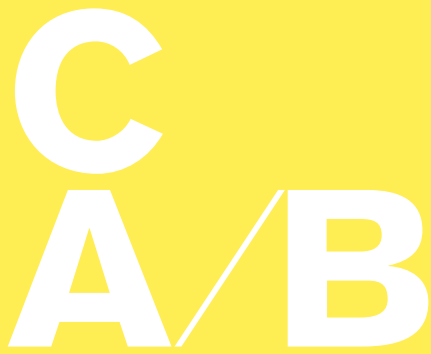
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