



THE ZIMBABWE ELECTIONS

by Garrett Jones

In yet another display of madness, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe and his cronies have decided that if you lose the presidential election, simply do not announce the result and maybe everyone will go away. Mugabe and his party, Zanu-PF, decisively lost the March 29 elections for the presidency and parliament. In a move comprehensible only to a madman, the Mugabe government has simply declined to announce the results for over a month. When results were finally announced by the electoral commission, it was declared that Mugabe had lost to the challenger, but the race was so close that a run off would have to be held to decide final winner. Maybe. At a time to be determined. August looks good. If we feel like it.

Mugabe's African neighbors, especially South African president Thabo Mbeki, have so far declined to make more than bleating noises from the sidelines. While winning the presidential election in Zimbabwe is akin to winning a lottery for a new house that just burned to the ground, it seems to be true that the smaller the stakes, the more vicious the conflict. Perhaps that is because there is so little left to share after twenty-eight years of Mugabe's rule.

Inflation in Zimbabwe is estimated to be around 1 million percent a year (but this number is rising daily). It may not be a world record, but it certainly sets a personal best for this first decade of the 21st century--it costs ten million Zimbabwe dollars for a loaf of bread at current prices. Inflation is just one of the serious problems facing a new government. Unemployment approaches 80 percent. Corruption among the mid- and lower-level public servants is not just rampant, it is compulsory in order to survive. No infrastructure investments worth the name have been made in twenty years. Technical expertise and foreign investment in a country once known for the excellence of its educational system are now simply unknown. Anyone with skills, including Zimbabwe's once well-trained education professionals, has left the country long ago.

Zimbabwe's diaspora should be viewed as both the savior and the bane of its people. International food aid and the money being sent into the country from those Zimbabweans working in nearby countries are the only things holding mass starvation at bay. Emigration is also a pressure relief valve for Mugabe as the young and capable are forced to leave the country to find work. In a certain twisted way it is a politically masterful move to simply export your young and disaffected, rather than taking steps to improve the situation internally. The only people with any serious funds or assets are Mugabe cronies in high positions within the party and the military. Everyone else is dirt-poor and scrambling to make it through another day.

While Africa has suffered through more than its share of incompetent and insane rulers, Africans have usually displayed a capacity for forgiveness for that same ruler that is in many ways unique. That is unlikely to be the case when Mugabe finally goes. (He is said to 84 years old, but his health is reported to be good.) This is not going to be another South African truth and reconciliation, "Kumbaya" process. Mugabe and his cronies will be lucky to make it through any change of government with their skins. There seems to be a deep anger at what has been done to the country and its chance at a prosperous future. A crazy old man and his cronies looted a prosperous African country while the world watched. There is very little left now, except the idea of Zimbabwe.

All the government institutions, to include the police, judiciary and the Army, have shared in grinding down the population and squandering the country's wealth. Church leaders have stood up to Mugabe on occasion, but have largely been silenced through intimidation or blackmail. Under Mugabe, an entire generation of technocrats has been raised not ever having seen a working government in action. The only organization in the country with any credibility is the opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change, and its leader Morgan Tsvangirai. His main qualification to govern is that he opposed Mugabe when no one else would. That may be enough to get him into office at some point in the future, but Zimbabwe will be far from a going concern with the just a change of leaders.

With 80 percent unemployment and one million percent inflation, the Zimbabwe economy needs to go back in time to when its currency was stable and it was a major food exporter to the rest of Africa. Unfortunately, that is not politically possible. No matter how economically disastrous Mugabe's seizure of white commercial farms may have been, it is politically irreversible. Commercial farms that were once white owned and highly productive have been confiscated and are now largely owned by Mugabe cronies or occupied by small subsistence farmers. With that being the case, Zimbabwe cannot simply turn back the clock and go back to being a commercial agricultural exporter. Small-scale subsistence farming does not lend itself to the export market. There are some African commercial farmers, but far too few to meet internal needs, much less provide a surplus for export.

A further impediment to improving the productivity of the agricultural sector will be the squabbling over who owns what. The court fights and political maneuvering could go on for decades. All of these actions will make the Zimbabwean agricultural sector even more unattractive to foreign investors. If the small-scale farms could be brought into productive cultivation, starvation could be avoided, but the agricultural sector is no longer going to be the engine for Zimbabwe's economy.

Zimbabwe does have significant mineral resources, but again, the government has driven off competent ownership and run the infrastructure into the ground. World mineral commodities markets are currently peaking as Zimbabwe's mineral production falls by the day. Substantial capital would be needed to bring Zimbabwe's mining sector back from its current position. The other likely foreign exchange earner could be tourism, but as we have recently seen in Kenya, stability is everything in the African tourist trade. Zimbabwe has a number of significant tourist attractions, Great Zimbabwe, Victoria Falls etc, but as with the rest of the economy, these attractions will need significant foreign investment to bring infrastructure up to international standards.

REGIONAL ECONOMIES

Until now, Zimbabwe's neighbors have taken in many of Zimbabwe's diaspora, and to some extent profited from shortages through a booming border trade. This lax immigration policy is now becoming a burden for neighboring countries because of the sheer size of the population seeking work and food. Even South Africa, the regional economic powerhouse, is starting to pursue a border policing policy more reminiscent of apartheid governments than the "Rainbow Nation". Rising unemployment in South Africa is increasing resentment towards the economic refugees from Zimbabwe, who are willing to take any kind of work for any payment in "real money" as an improvement to what they have at home. In May, a series of lethal riots have taken place in the South African townships, and thousands of economic refugees from neighboring countries have been killed and driven from their homes.

For a while, Tsvangirai was unable to return to Zimbabwe to contest the putative runoff elections for fear of being assassinated. None of the neighboring African governments had been able to extract a believable guarantee for his safety from the Mugabe government. Finally, the weekend of May 24-25, Tsvangirai returned to Zimbabwe, though the threat to his life remains very real. Meanwhile a Chinese ship loaded with mortars and rocket propelled grenades destined for Zimbabwe was turned back from unloading in South Africa. Local South African trade unions refused to unload the cargo because they feared the weapons would be used against Mugabe's political opponents. It appears to be a justified fear as a wave of killings and beatings have targeted individuals who oppose the Mugabe government.

The situation is now at something of a stand off. Mugabe and his cronies will not leave, and Mugabe is unable to abuse his suffering population into voting for him. Mugabe is faced with the prospect of dispensing with the polite fiction of democratic elections or hoping to kill enough people that he can frighten the opposition into staying away from the election polls. In the short-term, it would be difficult for Mugabe to hold a new and credible election in the next few months. Short of conducting the election at gunpoint, the population simply will no longer vote for Mugabe and his cronies. The time of the African dictator is not yet over, and to some extent Mugabe is probably correct: delay long enough and the world will lose interest.

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