



Zimbabwe: Pragmatic Engagement at a Critical Juncture? [Excerpt]

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On commission from the Ministry of Defence, the FOI Studies in African Security team has conducted a number of studies relating to Southern Africa. The report from which this excerpt is derived is focused on the political, humanitarian and security-related situation in Zimbabwe. It examines whether the international community should engage the GNU in support of the political process as well as to identify potential strategies for such an engagement in the event that it takes place. It does so through first identifying key triggers for destabilising the security situation. It then identifies the critical security concerns that are likely to remain beyond the transition period, but which require attention during the transition phase in order to pave way for a more democratic and stable development of the country. Finally, it seeks to identify risks of, and potential strategies for, the international community to engage in some of these issues.

1. Background

In February this year, the two factions of the long-time opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) joined Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in an inclusive government, popularly referred to as Government of National Unity (GNU). While it remains to be seen what influence Morgan Tsvangirai, his MDC-T party as well as the other faction, MDC-Mutambara (MDC-M), will have, the formation of the GNU marks a shift in the political positions in Zimbabwe.

After a decade's standoff, most observers see it as a critical juncture in the Zimbabwean political landscape. This decade, Zimbabwe has been marred by one of the most rapid declines in socio-economic standards ever recorded in a non-war situation, with record levels of inflation, contraction of the economy, the world's lowest life expectancy, and most recently the worst cholera epidemic to have hit Africa in decades.

A key underlying factor to this development is bad governance, including economic mismanagement and corruption, nepotism, disrespect for property rights and an oppressive political climate, with an entrenchment of the governing party and the military across the civil service and widespread human rights abuses. Some observers would add that the restrictive measures and targeted sanctions by the international community have escalated the situation since it has reduced access to critical development assistance. Nevertheless, it should be noted that humanitarian assistance has continued to flow into the country in increasing amounts and beyond strict interpretations of humanitarian aid.

Should the GNU succeed in delivering a new constitution as set out in the Global Political Agreement (GPA), and pave the way for fresh elections, this negative trend could begin to be reversed. However, commitment to the process is highly questionable. ZANU-PF, as a party, is seen to be split between those who are reluctantly engaged in the process, but appreciate the possibility of using it to recover legitimacy before reclaiming power, and those who actively oppose it to maintain the status quo. The two factions of MDC on the other hand, are seen to be committed to achieving change, even if there



are different views of how to go about this, and whether the GNU is the right vessel for change, within, and between, the two factions¹.

As these views and forces are played out, ZANU-PF, which has been in power since independence in 1980, is seen as the stronger party. Nevertheless, at the onset of the negotiations, neither ZANU-PF nor MDC – the only opposition party to speak of throughout the spiralling socioeconomic downturn – seem to have wanted to give in to the formation of a GNU. The outcome of the negotiations, with the formation of the GNU, therefore seems to suggest that neither party is monolithic.

Meanwhile the international community is divided, with the region and the continent opting for outright support for the GNU, while most of the major donors in the wider international community are adopting a more cautious approach and call for concrete improvements before engaging beyond an already stretched humanitarian mandate.

This poses serious challenges, primarily for MDC-T as it struggles to mobilise support for change within key sectors of society, and maintain its legitimacy, from a platform of a bankrupt government.

This highly volatile situation poses serious questions regarding the likely political developments and associated security threats. While the uncertainty of the sincerity of the efforts and developments would tempt outside governments to wait and see before committing to direct support, observers from academia and civil society are quick to point out the need for bold action to seize the window of opportunity that has opened in a political landscape that has been locked for large parts of the last decade.

Regardless of what routes are taken, a number of critical security issues are likely to remain in Zimbabwe. It is therefore critical to understand the nature of these remaining security issues as well as the risks involved in providing support during this transitional phase, in order to make informed decisions as to whether, and if so how, to reengage² in the political development of Zimbabwe.

2. Triggers for destabilising the security situation

When assessing the risks of a destabilisation of the security situation in light of the historical abuses by the security sector, one cannot exclude widespread atrocities or even crimes against humanity. Should tensions among the successor camps in ZANU-PF erupt into violence from within the party, they pose the most potent threat to the country's security situation. This could be caused by a tilting of powers in favour of one of either camp. A related and highly explosive matter is the potential for a leadership vacuum in ZANU-PF in the event that the, by now 85 year old, President were to pass away ahead of a settlement of the current political situation. Together these fears therefore increase the urgency of finding a political solution during the 18-24 months' transition period given to the GNU under the GPA, to enable the drafting of a new constitution and a smooth transition.

¹ MDC split into two different factions in 2005/6, taking the names of their respective leaders, MDC-T led by Morgan Tsvangirai, and MDC-M, led by Arthur Mutambara.

² Given the limitations in donors' engagement, potential renewed support to the Government of Zimbabwe has popularly been termed "reengagement". In this paper, the terms "engagement" and "engage" are used interchangeably with "reengagement" and "reengage" respectively. It is given a broad meaning of engaging to support the political process embarked upon by the GNU, i.e. beyond humanitarian aid, and is not limited to balance of payment support.



Another high risk-high impact scenario is hardliners from the security forces making way for consolidation of the ZANU-PF hold to power, by a coup or coup-like manoeuvre. According to some observers, this would be more likely in the event of either a breakup of the GNU, or direct challenges by the international community for e.g. indictments under the International Criminal Court (ICC). While the same hardliners are seen as the spoilers actively trying to break up the GNU, this therefore calls for efforts at maintaining the GNU, despite these spoiling tactics. Some would also hold that a failure of the GNU could lead more impatient factions of the MDC to draw the conclusion that political means are exhausted and therefore resort to violence. This equally puts emphasis on the importance of the GNU process to succeed.

At a lower level of intensity, violent riots could erupt as a result of a failure to deliver on rising expectations among the population. However, noting the extent to which the ZANU-PF regime has been willing to go in the past to pre-empt riots, and the risk of hardliners from within the security sector seizing power on a pretext of restoring public order, this could equally lead to widespread human rights abuses and high levels of violence inflicted upon the population. On the other hand, should the signs of frustration that are visible within the lower ranks of the security sector lead them to refuse to mobilise against the population, riots and protests might erupt without leading to the repressive reaction traditional to the responses by Zimbabwean security forces.

3. Critical reforms for Zimbabwe's Security

Regardless of the ongoing developments in Zimbabwe a number of security concerns are likely to remain. In order to offset some of the triggers for destabilising the security situation, and to pave way for a more democratic and stable post-transition development of the country, critical attention will be required to these remaining areas of *governance*, the *security sector reform* and *transitional justice and reconciliation*.

Since the multifaceted crisis in Zimbabwe is fundamentally rooted in *governance* failure, the situation calls for fundamental political change towards a more democratic, accountable and transparent government. Constitutional reform is key to this process and forms a crucial part of the GPA. It could lay the foundations for a reform of the political institutions, to come to terms with the party-state entrenchment of ZANU-PF across the spectrum of the public sector, and restoration of the rule of law. A constitutional reform also provides the basis for elections after the transitional period.

The trend of a partisan civil service is most worrying and can have most detrimental effect on human security when it infects the security sector. Coupled with the problem of turning the military on its own citizens, to ensure the sovereignty of the ZANU-PF party, Zimbabwe has developed a culture of impunity for human rights abuses committed by members of the security sector and its leadership. As such the security sector continues to pose serious threats to the security of the population and the likelihood of a democratic transition. Together these challenges point to the urgency for a *security sector reform* in Zimbabwe. Indeed it might be the most critical of a much needed de-politicisation of the public sector.

Zimbabwe has been plagued by human rights abuses since before its independence, suggesting a *transitional justice and reconciliation* process is inevitable for marking an end to human rights atrocities and a culture of impunity as well as paving the way for national healing. As with most such processes, balancing justice and peace, as well as timing and compromise will be essential. While encouraging patience, as the political process towards a new constitution proceeds, the groundwork of victim consultation and documentation should continue. A positive development in this regard is the



formation of the National Healing Committee, with a Minister from each of the three parties, as it lends support to community reconciliatory work.

4. Risks of Reengaging the GNU

While many local and regional actors have called for “reengagement” by the international community, traditional donors have remained cautious in their approach, opting for a “wait and see” approach, during which humanitarian funding continues to be provided to Zimbabwe. This has been justified by a wish to see improvements in concrete action, in the areas below:

1. Full and equal access to humanitarian assistance
2. Commitment to macroeconomic stabilisation in accordance with guidance from relevant regional and international agencies
3. Restoration of the rule of law, including enforcement of contracts, an independent judiciary, and respect for property rights
4. Commitment to the democratic process and respect for internationally accepted human rights standards, including commitment to freedom of expression, freedom of print and broadcasting media, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association
5. A commitment to timely elections held in accordance with international standards, and in the presence of international election observers.

Beyond continuing the political pressure for improvements in key governance areas, strong reservations against reengagement with the GNU under current conditions derive from the real risks that it would imply. Drawing from the benchmarks for reengagement set by international donors as well as the areas of critical reform, risks identified include *loosing funds, causing more suffering on the population of Zimbabwe, lending legitimacy to abusive and non-democratic forces or eroding ones own legitimacy in the international arena*. However, it has also been shown that avoiding actively engaging the current situation could equally facilitate the continuation of the above mentioned ills. This would suggest that the political opportunity offered by the GPA and the formation of the GNU should be critically examined for pragmatic entry points for supporting the political process. The report therefore concludes with a non-exhaustive reengagement strategy.

6. Reengagement Strategy and Concluding Remarks

The report shows that the situation in Zimbabwe is highly fragile and remains rife with challenges which could erupt into violence. Despite this, the current GNU, and the GPA that led to its formation, have presented a window of opportunity in the long-time stalemate in the country’s political landscape. As such it has also presented the world with critical choices to make. The report suggests that avoiding a reengagement, at the pretext of first wanting to see progress, could condemn the fragile process to failure, and possible eruption of violence. At the same time, engaging in the political process is by no means a simple exercise. For international actors seeking to take a proactive role at this crucial moment, the path to normalising relations with the Government of Zimbabwe remains riddled with risks. These risks could land international actors in awkward positions, lending legitimacy to an abusive regime, or, in the worst case, finding themselves complicit in crimes committed by Zimbabwean actors. Nevertheless, when faced with the option of losing the momentum presented by the current GNU and watching Zimbabwe tumble, yet again, into a downwards spiral with a possible escalation of violence, a concerned international community needs to urgently find entry points for tilting the power in favour of forces open to reform. Drawing from the potential triggers for violence and the areas of remaining security threats requiring attention during the transition period (governance,



security sector reform and transitional justice and reconciliation), some such options have been presented, as summarised below:

Governance:

- *Proactive engagement by SADC through assisting the parties to agree to benchmarks for the implementation of the GPA and deployment of a monitoring team to oversee and report on the progress against those benchmarks;*
- *Enhance the ability of the Parliament to exercise democratic oversight through support for e.g. capacity building in security sector reform; and*
- *Support decentralisation by empowering local government to deliver key social services, such as water and sanitation;*

Security Sector Reform (SSR)

- *Adopt a low-key, flexible step-by-step approach to SSR anchored in local ownership;*
- *Enhance the capacity of CSOs and Parliamentarians to contribute to the SSR process;*
- *Let the SSR process be guided by human security, and plan for e.g. community policing;*
- *Offer training to the uniformed services in human rights, codes of conduct, HIV/AIDS as well as S-GBV;*
- *Engage Zimbabwean National Defence Forces in PSO:s under SADC/AU or UN interventions; and*
- *Engage informal, paramilitary, elements in demobilisation and reintegration initiatives, through offering civilian livelihood options, psychosocial counselling and provision of awareness raising of HIV/AIDS and S-GBV*

Public Grievances and Frustrations

- *Support community initiatives for reconciliation and conflict transformation*
- *Provide resources to enable the National Healing Committee to engage in lessons-learned trips to countries which have undergone transitional justice and reconciliation processes as well as for holding consultations with civil society*
- *Expand the ongoing support for retention allowances to service providers in the health sector to civil servants in other critical services such as education; and*
- *Shift the food security assistance towards food production, through input promotion to small scale farmers and pre-financing loans to private companies*