

## **A background to the situation in Zimbabwe**

The Global Political Agreement (GPA) signed in September 2008 and the formation of a Government of National Unity in February 2009 may lead to Zimbabwe emerging from its political, economic and humanitarian crisis, although that is far from certain. It is important to understand that the difficulties that have plagued the country in recent years are not new, but are firmly rooted in Zimbabwe's colonial and imperialist past. Zimbabwe's tumultuous recent history has its roots in the foundation of the British South Africa Company in 1889 and the scramble for Africa.

In 1965 the white minority regime made its illegal Unilateral Declaration of Independence to prevent democratic government of Zimbabwe.

The struggle for liberation that ensued finally ended in 1979 when the newly elected Thatcher government responded to the rapidly advancing guerrilla fighters of the liberation movement by negotiating the Lancaster House Agreement. The Agreement ensured that the white minority would retain as much as possible of its political and economic privileges including the ownership of land for the next ten years. Although the Agreement allowed for democratic elections, it did little to help the new ZANU-PF Government redress the gross economic and social inequalities that resulted from white minority rule.

Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 was a critical turning point not only for the country but for other struggles in the region. Up to 80,000 Zimbabweans died in the fight for freedom and Zimbabwe's continuing solidarity with the struggles in South Africa and Namibia cost it dear in more lives and economic hardship.

Zimbabwe made significant strides in social provision and economic development in the period after independence. Between 1980 and 1990, real spending on health more than doubled, on primary education it nearly tripled, infant mortality fell from 88 to 61 per 1000 and literacy levels increased dramatically. These were great achievements for the independent Zimbabwe. There were though the massacres in Matabeleland in the 1980s when by some estimates 20,000 died. Those who ordered the massacres blamed the apartheid regime of South Africa for provoking unrest and insecurity.

In 1990 the World Bank advised (in effect, imposed) a Structural Adjustment Programme on Zimbabwe, including strict free market conditions which eroded its economic gains. This led to a popular mobilisation against the Government led by the trade unions. The Government, which had faced little organised criticism up until this point, responded by clamping down on civil society.

### **The Land Question**

Land is at the root of the crisis in Zimbabwe. A history of land seizures by whites since 1889 meant that by 1980 42 per cent of the land, including the most fertile areas, was owned by 6000 white commercial farmers. Much of the white-owned land was left fallow or under-utilised, while most of the black population was crowded into low-quality Native Reserves. The drive to overturn this grotesque injustice was at the heart of the liberation struggle and central to the negotiations at the time of independence.

When the Thatcher Government insisted that the new Zimbabwe Government maintained the colonial injustice by guaranteeing existing property rights for the white

minority, it was expected that they would support a resettlement programme under the Lancaster House Agreement. Despite reassurances from British and US officials, financial support for land resettlement projects was inadequate and slow.

At the end of the ten-year period for maintaining land rights progress on land reform remained slow. Increasingly the government made land grants to politically favoured large-scale farmers. In 1998 the Zimbabwean Government and international donors signed up to a programme for a phased expansion of land reform. However, many of the same rules established at Lancaster House were retained.

In 2000 the Government's attempt to amend the constitution to allow the appropriation of land was defeated in a referendum. This was closely followed by the official sanctioning of farm occupations by war veterans in the run-up to the June 2000 parliamentary elections. The Government also announced the implementation of a 'fast-track' land redistribution programme. These measures resulted in thousands of farm workers being displaced from commercial farms.

By 2005 there had been no significant reallocation of land to the people in most need. Instead, through a process of cronyism, most farms went to the political elite. Much of the land taken over by the Government now lies unworked, producing only a fraction of what is needed to feed the country's people, let alone to trade with the outside world.

### **Government Repression**

The Government responded swiftly to the growing popular opposition in Zimbabwe by increasingly repressing the pro democracy movement. As the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) grew and particularly when white commercial farmers began to declare their support for the new party, the Government made clear that political opposition to ZANU-PF would be blocked.

The elections in March 2005 were mired in accusations of vote rigging, violence and intimidation. The Government and its security services also targeted people living in 'slums' and 'unofficial dwellings', including the displacement of more than 200,000 in Operation Murambatsvina.

Trade union meetings and leaders were systematically attacked; attacks on Church and student leaders were stepped up; the freedom of the press was curtailed with attacks on critical journalists and the banning of foreign correspondents; court rulings were ignored by the Government whilst many in the judiciary were replaced; and new legislation was introduced to restrict the funding of NGOs and opposition political parties.

### **Elections and the Global Political Agreement**

On 29 March 2008 Zimbabwe held presidential and parliamentary elections. These elections although not without problems were widely regarded as the freest and fairest in Zimbabwe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It took a month however for the final results to be declared with everything pointing to efforts to manipulate results. However, the Government lost its parliamentary majority and Robert Mugabe came second in the presidential ballot but Morgan Tsvangirai was declared not to have achieved more than 50 per cent requiring a run off presidential.

Violence, intimidation including murders, beatings, disappearances, threats were significantly increased in the run-up to a second presidential ballot, eventually forcing

Morgan Tsvangari's withdrawal. The ballot took place on June 27<sup>th</sup> 2008 and Robert Mugabe, the sole candidate was returned as president. The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) official observer mission declared the electoral process for the run off elections did not comply with SADC's guidelines and principles for democratic elections.

Political deadlock continued until the 15th September 2008 when the 'Global Political Agreement' was signed paving the way for the establishment of an inclusive government between ZANU-PF and the 2 factions of the MDC. However, negotiations faltered when the MDC accused Mugabe's party of an unequal distribution of powerful ministries. A final deal was reached in January 2009 and Morgan Tsvangirai was sworn in as Prime Minister on 11th February.

In July 2009 a year of consultations began on a proposed constitution for Zimbabwe, intended to be followed by a referendum and elections. Civil society groups including the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions strongly object to the process believing it not to be sufficiently participatory. There continues to be denials of freedom of organisation, much of the state machinery, police, army, judiciary, civil service seems to be serving Zanu PF rather than a multi-party government. There is some loosening of media controls. Civil society is establishing mechanisms to monitor and report on the implementation of the Global Political Agreement.