

Zimbabwe: Failing Better?

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The words of Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho* fit Zimbabwe. If the process of 'democratisation', liberalisation, and all those other aspects of capitalist modernity is 'westward,' then Zimbabwe under a challenged Mugabe has been heading there in almost the worst conceivable way. But for the democrats struggling to enlarge their space the words of the ultimate tragic optimist are appropriate too. More than three decades (including the liberation war after the mid-seventies) under Mugabe have meant those attempting to widen space for their democratic desires being doomed to repeat Beckett's injunction: "ever tried? Ever failed? No matter, try again, fail again, Fail better".¹ It's hard not to "throw up for good" in such a struggle, but they haven't yet. The problem, though, is finding a way to combine parliamentary and extra-parliamentary roads to that end.²



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1. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, London: John Calder, 1983. The 'tragic optimist' school of African studies is epitomised by Christopher Cramer's exceptional *Civil War is Not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries*, London: Hurst & Co, 2006 (its Indiana University Press version is more boringly called *Violence in Developing Countries: War, Memory, Progress*).
2. David Moore and Tapera Kapuya 'Zimbabwe's Opposition Now: The Parliamentary Road or Mass Action on the Streets?' *Global Dialogue*, 10, 2 (August 2005), pp. 4-9.

The Deal Signed: Arthur Mutambara (MDC-M), Robert Mugabe, Morgan Tsvangirai (MDC-T) & Thabo Mbeki

As these words were written Zimbabwe was on the edge of another of its many historical precipices. Mid September's high hopes for a transitional government based on the *Agreement between the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the Two Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Formations, on Resolving the Challenges Facing Zimbabwe* had seemed to come to naught. Yet there had been hope. Zimbabwe's two main parties (and the third, a small splinter of the Movement for Democratic Change — MDC-M, led by once radical university student Arthur Mutambara) signed the settlement on September 11. A huge SADC procession four days later poured praise on SADC's facilitator Thabo Mbeki for pulling the hare out of the hat, and appeared to add enough pomp and circumstance to satisfy Mugabe's royal pretensions. Many thought it would mark the beginning of his end, even if it fell far short of registering the full extent of changes in Zimbabwe's democratic contours since the MDC had been struggling for its due share of power in 1999. To be sure, warnings ensued from the National Constitutional Assembly's Lovemore Maduku that the accord was 'more of capitulation by the MDC than by ZANU-PF' that only gave 'cosmetic executive authority' for Tsvangirai³, and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions thought it wasn't worth its paper. A hard front in the MDC led reportedly by Secretary-General Tendai Biti (also a former student radical) took its cue from civil society, opposing the parliamentarians who'd very much have liked to get down to work — and continue to get paid: by the end of October their salaries in a non-functioning parliament were only worth US\$10 a month. Harare sources claimed that Mutambara had joined his old university chum to call for abandoning the deal, although his partners Welshman Ncube and Priscilla Misihairabwi-

3. Basildon Peta, 'Tsvangirai confident that deal will work', *Sunday Independent* (Johannesburg), September 14, 2008, Edn. 3.

sMushonga, who led the 2005 split away from Tsvangirai and later invited Mutambara back from his American pursuits of robotic science and historically devoted to parliament at any cost, would presumably be against that strategy. It could be that the volatile Mutambara, badly bruised by appearing to be a Mugabe acolyte during the pre-settlement conjuncture, was recouping his student-civil society credentials.⁴



The MPs were sitting on the cusp of a significant victory: Mugabe had unilaterally called parliament — now structured by the March 29 MDC victory that even the ZANU-PF biased Zimbabwe Electoral Commission could not fix, after five weeks of trying⁵) — to sit in late August, hoping an MDC-M candidate for speaker would cause some friction on its August 23's election. But some MDC-M members voted against their candidate, as did a few

from ZANU-PF. The MDC-T's National Chairman Lovemore Moyo won the speaker's prize with 110 votes of the assembly's 210. Some of these votes weren't quite private, given that many MPs waved their marked ballots to all and sundry (thus inciting Independent MP Jonathan Moyo, ZANU-PF's former propaganda chief, to file an application to the High Court against it), and it has been said that a few were paid for by Freedom House's Orange revolutionaries: nevertheless they constituted something of a parliamentary coup. Democracy seemed to be on a roll.

Of course there was no doubt that the September 11 settlement signified dual power, not shared power. Sharing would be too warm and fuzzy a concept to describe the feelings between the MDC and ZANU-PF after an eight and a half year campaign in which the latter used every dirty trick in the book, and invented new ones when those ran out. But in spite of awkward notions such as giving Morgan Tsvangirai prime ministerial 'executive power' over a cabinet 'council' which was actually the same as the cabinet over which Mugabe would preside, and creating two deputy prime ministers from the MDCs to match Mugabe's two vice-presidents, there was a decent core to the 18 or more month transitional scheme. The drafting of the accord was almost half and half MDC liberal humanism ("DETERMINED to act in a manner that demonstrates respect for the democratic values of justice, fairness, openness, tolerance, equality, respect of all persons and human rights" and "to build a society free of violence, fear, intimidation, hatred, patronage, corruption and founded on justice, fairness, openness, transparency, dignity and equality") side by side with ZANU-PFist nationalism ("RECOGNISING and accepting that the Land Question has been at the core of the contestation in Zimbabwe", noting "the present economic and political isolation of Zimbabwe by the United Kingdom, European Union, United States of America and other sections of the International Community" and that "the primary obligation of compensating former land owners for

4. By the end of October it was reported that the MDC was proposing to remove the rival faction from the agreement. This was after Mutambara had spoken in support of Morgan Tsvangirai's decision not to attend a Southern African Development Community meeting in Mbabane called in the last week of October to settle the deal (about which more later). Zimbabwean politics is nothing if not volatile. Jason Moyo, 'MDC sets its sights on the UN', *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg) October 31-November 6, 2008, p. 14.

5. Susan Booyson, 'The Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in Zimbabwe, March and June 2008', *Electoral Studies*, 24, 4 (forthcoming December 2008). See also Booyson's authored Electoral Institute of Southern Africa, *The Zimbabwe Harmonised Elections of 29 March 2008, Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Government Elections with Postscript on the Presidential Run-off of 27 June 2008 and the Multi-Party Agreement of 15 September 2008*, Electoral Institute of Southern Africa Observer Mission Report No. 28, Johannesburg, 2008.

land acquired rests on the former colonial power”⁶), but a momentum borne by that intangible concept of political ‘will’ might have carried it on beyond the hackneyed past. If the MDC-T and MDC-M could have co-operated they’d have held a fragile one-seat majority in cabinet and parliament (and it was expected the ‘appointments’ to Senate and governorships would be even-handed). There would have been economic and military councils, and a widely consultative process to create a new constitution on which the National Constitutional Assembly, which started the whole process of constitutional democratisation back in 1998, started work immediately on that score. As well, a Periodic Review Mechanism, consisting of two members from each party, signified equal weighting (although one can argue that the Mutambara faction may not ‘really’ deserve equality at such a level, having only gained 10 seats and 4.83% of the March 29 vote,) on final say.

Even the naysayers seemed to think there’d be a fair sharing of important cabinet posts. The MDC, it was agreed — but never signed — had secured the departments of Home Affairs, Justice, Finance and Information Ministries while ZANU-PF retained Defence, Agriculture, Mines and Prisons. An MDC MP with a long tradition in the labour unions, eager to take up his new legislative seat, opined ‘we are not at war: Mugabe can keep the army;’ when queried on rumours that Anglo-American and the like had pushed hard for the deal — any deal! — in fear of heightened British sanctions, he joked ‘I hope they sponsor my football team.’ Even the caustic RW Johnson was buoyed by the prospect of imperial intervention: he declared that the trusty Brits would ride in to rectify the military.⁷ The crazed Gideon Gono would be no longer chair of the Reserve Bank, so the donors’ “Fishmongers” plan (named after the Harare restaurant in which the

usual suspects met to draft tough IMF-style shock therapy with lots of humanitarian band-aids) would cool an inflation rate that as of mid-October was 231,000,000%. With the help of a billion and a half dollars of aid, Zimbabwe would soon reach its (mythical) historical status of ‘breadbasket’ state. As if immaculately conceived, a 240 page ‘discussion document’ authored by a UNDP team ranging from University of Zimbabwe Management Studies professor Tony Hawkins on the right to former Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) economist Godfrey Kanyenze on the left was unveiled, promising economic nirvana (if heaven was last seen in 1991) in 12 years if growth could average five per cent annually. The ‘manufactured in Zimbabwe’ *Comprehensive Economic Recovery in Zimbabwe*⁸ struck radical political economist Patrick Bond as ‘neo-liberal’, perhaps because it said that Zimbabwe is not ready for a ‘developmental state’, while John Robertson, an economist of more orthodox bent, said it would only serve to breed bureaucrats. On signing, Tsvangirai said to the sceptical *Sunday Independent* reporter that he had to give the ‘benefit of the doubt’ to the man who had so often labelled him as Blair’s tea-boy and an ignorant ‘chematama’ (fat-face).⁹

Yet by November it looked as if none of this would come to pass. For some reason Tsvangirai had buckled to the SADC negotiator’s ‘don’t worry: crisis what crisis?’ attitude to the construction of the cabinet (along with just about everything else in Zimbabwe) and failed to gain guarantees on the distribution of posts. Thabo Mbeki, known to harbour a pungent dislike for Tsvangirai (“he could never lead Zimbabwe to liberation”, he’s reported to have said) must have foreseen his unceremonious sacking back home at the hands of the ANC’s Zuma gang, so pushed Tsvangirai to accept empty promises about that cabinet. Mugabe, who as ex-guerrilla leader (thrown into jail from 1977 to 1980

6. The best juxtaposition was this: the accord promised to “reject any unlawful, violent, undemocratic and unconstitutional means of changing governments” and also warned that “no outsiders have a right to call or campaign for regime change in Zimbabwe”.

7. RW Johnson, ‘Security is first test of Zimbabwe deal’, *Sunday Times* (London), September 14, 2008.

8. United Nations Development Programme, *Comprehensive Economic Recovery in Zimbabwe: A Discussion Document*, Harare, 2008.

9. Peta, ‘Tsvangirai confident’

by Mugabe and Samora Machel for seeming to be a threat to the former) and now co-leader of the oppositional Zimbabwe Liberation Veterans' Forum Wilfred Mhanda says will take the 1% of a deal that looks 99% against him and win, was soon to deny the MDC's place at the table. Beholden to the prospects of losing control of the ZANU-PF congress in December, and tied to a rejectionist camp led by Emmerson Mnangagwa (infamous for his role as head of security in the *Gukurahundi* that claimed thousands of lives as ZANU-PF forced Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union to enter into a unity pact that no one wants to see repeated now: ZAPU was swallowed whole) he could not summon the strength to deprive any of his ministers of a place around the trough. Cutting a cabinet of thirty in half is not an easy task: nor is giving up the military or finance. The former keeps opposition in check and precludes justice for sins of the past; the latter keeps the official rate of exchange alive and thus the main channel of corruption (it takes about four billion Zimbabwean dollars to buy one American one on the parallel market, but only ten thousand if one has access to the official rate!). A Harare story that Mnangagwa pushed the unelected Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa (who in 2002 had, with the active encouragement of perhaps the only foreign policy-maker in South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, entered into heavy negotiations with then MDC Secretary-General Welshman Ncube, thus nicely the sewing lines of division in the MDC that contributed to its split in 2005), and was severely beaten by Mugabe's bodyguards, indicates the strains in the ruling party that is governing less and less every day. The popular exaggeration of the rumour, that had Mnangagwa pushing Mugabe, was squelched by one man who knows Mugabe well: if that had happened, he said, Mnangagwa would now be dead. Mugabe himself has admitted publicly that he fears rebellion from within.¹⁰ Mugabe remembers the mid-1970s divisions in ZANU very well, and probably *après moi, la deluge*, not quite realising the storms have been pelting for nearly a decade.

10. Jason Moyo, 'Mugabe Fears Zanu-PF Rebellion', *Mail & Guardian*, October 31-November 6, 2008, pp. 13-4.

Thus on October 12, a day after the three main protagonists in the prolonged haggling over dividing the cabinet positions agreed to call in Private Citizen Mbeki, in need of consultancy fees during his forced retirement, ZANU-PF announced the cabinet: Defence, Home Affairs, Justice, Media and Higher Education (those pesky students have to be watched) would be all for the ruling party, while the two MDCs were thrown the crumbs with economic reconstruction and social welfare functions — not good candidates for winning an election in a few years *sans* the donors pitching in for a government that is not even *plus ça change*. Finance was unresolved: perhaps that was left to the itinerant negotiator to assign. Tsvangirai addressed an October 12 rally saying that unless Home Affairs would be in his hands, the deal would be off. He was facing a split in his party: some said that only a demand for a new national election would save the MDC-T face. In the meantime, concerned activists were consulting the SADC (Southern African Development Community) and AU (African Union) diplomats persuading them to call an emergency summit. The Zimbabwe Liberation Veterans' Forum, made up of war veterans opposed to their peers who allied with Mugabe in the hopes they'd get some free land, appealed to the AU and SADC to let go of the lame-duck mediator and get a new process rolling. The ZLVF wondered "what informs the position of SADC leaders by conferring legitimacy to a rogue president whose hands drip with the blood of his own people and not of his imagined enemies from the West."¹¹

As expected, the October 13-15 meetings mediated by South Africa's past president resolved only that the MDC could take Finance for its troubles. Somewhere along the line it was proposed that Home Affairs be split: the MDC could take immigration functions while the guys with guns would be in the violent party's hands. No deal: and Tsvangirai seemed to be gaining ground. Denied a

11. The Zimbabwe Liberation Veterans' Forum, 'An Appeal for the African Union to Intervene to Resolve the Zimbabwean Political Impasse', Harare: August 26 2008.

passport for months (Home Affairs says there is no paper, but swimming star Kirsten Coventry got one in days and civil servants say the document is sitting in a desk) he refused to take emergency travel documents enabling him to attend the October 20 meeting of the SADC security troika+1 (Chair, South Africa; members, Angola, Mozambique and Swaziland) in Mbabane. And so, as the summer begins in southern Africa, millions of Zimbabweans are dying faster than ever before and the MDC ups the ante to SADC as a whole (to meet in South Africa in the first week of November), then the AU, and then elections to be monitored by the UN.

The time for such an intervention whilst thousands were beginning to starve as never before, would be, however, far too long. Kwashiorkor, Pellagra (an adult form of malnutrition leading to madness and death) and Marasmus stalked the land: estimates were that five million would be in danger of starvation by January 2009. The senior doctors are bought off: as Jan Raath wrote, in September the Reserve Bank bought imported cars for the hundred or so of them. The cost? US\$5 million.¹² The state had no funds to run examinations for its schools; and towards the end of October it recalled all government vehicles from their temporary users.

A new election could bring hope or more despair. There are indications that this is what the Mnangagwa faction wants. They will take complete power in the December ZANU-PF congress and resort again to the *Gukurahundi* tactics that raised their head in the weeks before the June 27 non-election to such an extent that Tsvangirai withdrew. This line of thought predicts that the MDC will be destroyed so they had better sign a deal now.

On the other hand, if the UN could rise out of its bureaucratic lethargy and run a real election — something that, if it had taken place more than half

a decade ago, might have solved the problem in the making — the humanitarian aid would flow in. Millions of lives could be saved, and more than a modicum of democracy could creep in. However, the UN is not well-known for doing much of anything in Africa — is the Democratic Republic of the Congo a success story? — although, ironically, one of its more successful elections was managed by Zimbabwean professor of law Reg Austin, in Cambodia in 1992. If one writes off the UN, only the settlement is left. The MDC would like two years to let the Economic Council bring a material base back in, and the constitution could be debated vigorously.



Joshua Bakacheza, an MDC activist, was abducted by men in a truck on 25 June 2008 in Msasa, Harare and shot in the head a few hours later, according to his colleague who survived a bullet to the head and the lungs in the same incident. Bakacheza's body was discovered lying in the open on 5 July, after a search of ten days. This pattern of abduction and subsequent murder account for 45 known deaths during April-June 2008.¹³

Could a wounded Mbeki magically wave his wand to solve all this? Could SADC? The AU? Resorting to fantasy in something approaching an 'academic' article illustrates the surreal nature of Zimbabwe now. The fact that senior doctors drive around in hypocritical abuse of their Hippocratic Oath while grown men and women place their faith in an Aids-

12. Jan Raath, 'Aid agencies: 5m face starvation in Zimbabwe: Silently, in rundown wards, starving children lie dying - malnutrition diseases are overwhelming hospitals,' *Times Online*, October 14, 2008.

13. Solidarity Peace Trust, *Desperately Seeking Sanity: What Prospects for a New Beginning in Zimbabwe?* (Solidarity Peace Trust, July 2008).

denialist brings us back to Beckett and his tradition. Such tragedies take us back to the world of literature, a salvation in Africa's perpetual crisis. This time, a leading MDC politician still under treason charges invokes African writers to state his position. Tendai Biti, writing of the crisis in education, brings Ngugi wa Thiongo's brilliant *The Wizard of the Crow* to his side: for him Ngugi's 'Abhurian State' "brilliantly describes" what happens to ruling classes and their empty ideology of nationalism.

Faced with the frustration of failing to transform the colonial state during the national democratic stage of the struggle, nationalism degenerates and decomposes into neo-patrimony, clientelism, the imperial presidency and patronage. In short, it converts the state into a rogue state where violence, corruption and personal accumulation become vehicles for the continued reproduction of the state.

The Abhurian State ... had been fore-written by Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People*, Sembene Ousmane in *The Last of the Empire* and Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*. At that stage, the highest level of decomposition, nationalism needs to be saved from itself or it will take the nation with it.

That is exactly where Zimbabwe is at the present moment. ZANU-PF needs to be saved from itself or it will annihilate the construct that Zimbabwe is.¹⁴

There is no doubt that the energies consumed in ridding Zimbabwe of Mugabe could be better spent elsewhere. If that one task could be achieved, it may not be chimerical to advance the proposition that the edifice he has built around himself would fall like a house of cards. One can only hope, with Beckett, that Zimbabwe's next failure will be better than usual: the doctors' cars remind us, though, that failure for some is success for others. Zimbabwe's political economy needs drastic overhauling, so those making new constitutions in this interregnum

— a space in which the wisdom of those running the financial markets of the world is seen to be equivalent to Robert Mugabe's — must constitute a new economy too.

14. Tendai Biti, 'MDC: Collapse of education system an indictment of ZANU PF,' MDC Press Statement, October 13, 2008. On SW Radio Africa, www.swradioafrica.com/pages/mdconeduc131008.htm.