

Mugabe's last stand? Why Zimbabwe might finally get a leader it deserves

By Jason Miks

Just over a quarter of a century ago Zimbabwe emerged from colonial rule with great promise. Blessed with a host of natural resources including commercial mineral deposits of metallurgical-grade chromite, coal, platinum and gold, the country's first two years of independence saw impressive growth of more than 20 per cent. Yet as they mark their 26th year as an independent nation this week, Zimbabweans are unlikely to be celebrating as they have joined a long list of African countries whose people have been let down by incompetent or despotic rulers.

Over the last six years Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe has presided over an economic breakdown which has led to a collapse in foreign investor confidence and seen the economy shrink by 7.1% last year alone, according to the International Monetary Fund.

The enormity of the situation which Mugabe's policies – including his land grab from white farmers – has wrought on the country is best reflected in the life expectancy figures released by the World Health Organisation this month, which showed a two year fall in life expectancy for women in just 12 months – Zimbabwean women now have the shortest life expectancy in the world and are, on average, expected to live to just 34 years. These figures can be attributed to both, the AIDS epidemic and the economic crisis which led one UN official last year to describe the country as in 'meltdown'.

Unemployment is estimated by some analysts to be running as high as eighty per cent, but even for those able to find work, inflation is rampant – over 900 per cent – and is further impoverishing Zimbabweans. Indeed one Zimbabwean commentator noted the price of a single car battery this year could have bought 14 brand new cars 10 years ago.

Prosper Chitambira, chief economist at the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, is also pessimistic. He recently told Agence France-Presse – 'There is nothing to celebrate...economically things are bad. The standards of living and real wages have slumped to 1975 levels. Even politically there is nothing to celebrate, our democratic space is now limited.'

Yet the much harassed and abused opposition still looks to be gearing up for another effort at utilising what little democratic space it has left. One leading opposition politician, Morgan Tsvangirai, is set to outline proposals this week for nationwide protests to rally opposition. Mr Tsvangirai led the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) through two elections which were widely criticised by many observers as highly flawed, but he was replaced as President of the MDC by Arthur Mutambara.

For his part Mutambara visited South Africa recently to meet with South African President Thabo Mbeki to discuss the situation. But Mbeki is unlikely to offer much in the way of salvation. His impotence in the face of the growing crisis has been little

short of shameful. Preferring what he describes 'quiet diplomacy', Mbeki has consistently dismissed calls to take a tougher stance against Mugabe, despite the fact that his country has enormous leverage, not least through its supply of electricity to the country.

Mr. Mbeki is unfortunately not alone in his inaction, being joined in misplaced African solidarity by Tanzania's former president Benjamin Mkapa who astonishingly referred to Zimbabwe's elections as free and fair and Mugabe as a 'Champion of democracy' – despite clear evidence of vote rigging and voter intimidation. The notion that Africans should be responsible for their own problems is of course admirable and only to be encouraged, but has too often been used as an excuse to shield corrupt leaders from any outside criticism. If Africa wants to shed its image as the hopeless continent then it needs to take action, or at the very least speak out when confronted with blatant cronyism.

Back in Zimbabwe the opposition will likely have to work largely without South Africa's help. To do this it will have to set aside its divisions and reunite its two factions, preferably behind Mr. Tsvangirai. He has shown courage in the past and his name-recognition has likely contributed to an apparent ground swell in his favour in recent weeks. He certainly seems to have the credibility to move the opposition forward.

President Mugabe is determined to encourage Zimbabweans to set aside any sense of hardship or disillusionment and celebrate the country's anniversary [*the 26th anniversary of Zimbabwe's independence on April 18th*] with pride. Yet there have been a number of articles in what is left of the independent press suggesting that Zimbabwe was better off before independence. Mugabe's celebratory plans could thus backfire by encouraging people to draw unfavourable contrasts.

If Tsvangirai is able to mobilise sufficient opposition, then the events around the anniversary could act as a catalyst to change by bringing frustrated Zimbabweans out against their repressive leader. The country certainly appears to be reaching a tipping point and it is now up to Mr Tsvangirai to exploit it for the sake of his countrymen. Whether the country tips towards a new leader or into disaster may well depend on what he can do in the next few months.