

QUICK POLICY INSIGHT

Zimbabwe's 2013 general elections: A genuine wind of change?

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Hopes are high that elections in 2013 will usher in significant political changes in Zimbabwe.

In 2013, Zimbabweans are to elect a new parliament and president. While the exact date of the ballot — the first since a new constitution was approved in March 2013 — remains unclear, hopes are high that the election could become a landmark event for the democratic transition of the country. Zimbabwe can move beyond 33 years of hegemonic rule under Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), possibly allowing Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) to lead the country's political change.

Uncertainty and political rivalry necessitate sensitivity from all actors.

However, uncertainty still obscures the political climate, and a peaceful transfer of power will demand great sensitivity from all actors involved — foreign, as well as domestic. And even if meaningful change does occur, it is far from certain that a new government will be able — and committed — to pave the way for Zimbabwe's democratic consolidation.

The legacy of a three-decade 'one-man show'

Since the 2008/2009 crisis, Zimbabwe has been ruled by a coalition government, leading to first signs of socio-economic progress.

During the last elections held in 2008, Mugabe's ZANU-PF did not win outright at the presidential ballot box — a first since 1980. Following the first-round victory of MDC leader Tsvangirai, an electoral crisis broke out, leading to rampant violence, intimidation of ZANU-PF opponents and the withdrawal of Tsvangirai's candidacy. In the face of strong international pressure, both parties agreed to form a power-sharing Global Political Agreement (GPA), brokered by South African President Thabo Mbeki.

This year's elections are a source of both optimism and worry.

The Government of National Unity (GNU), which took office in February 2009, has been marked by ongoing ZANU-PF dominance and MDC officials' frustration with being strategically sidelined. Despite slow socio-economic progress, Zimbabwe remains a low income country and holds one of the world's lowest scores in the UN human development index. Against this background, the polls are being awaited with excitement over potential changes, but also anxiety of renewed violence.

The men in the ring: David and Goliath?

ZANU-PF and the MDC continue to dominate the electoral landscape.

ZANU-PF has adopted anti-western rhetoric focusing on 'black empowerment'.

Yet the party suffers from corruption, public disappointment and Mugabe's advanced age.

The MDC presents itself as a young, energetic alternative to ZANU-PF.

Yet its reputation has been weakened by Tsvangirai's behaviour, internal corruption and the inability to improve politics under the GNU.

As in 2008, ZANU-PF and MDC are currently the two dominant parties. Yet neither has indicated any intention to extend the current power-sharing deal beyond 2013. ZANU-PF wants to shrug off its burdensome partner after more than four years of compromise, while the MDC wishes finally to assume control over politics. The presidential race is again turning into a duel between the parties' leaders, Mugabe and Tsvangirai. Although the outcome is uncertain, a number of factors are likely to affect the polls:

- ZANU-PF has adopted a populist policy, capitalising on anti-western moods amongst the people. Under the umbrella term 'black empowerment', the party promotes land redistribution and economic restructuring in favour of black Zimbabweans. In April, ZANU-PF drafted a law that would allow the expropriation of foreign investments without compensation. The party controls crucial state mechanisms, including the army, police and large elements of the media, allowing it to manage information and to intimidate the opposition. Recent reports that the party has revived the National Youth Service — nicknamed the 'Green Bombers' and notorious for its anti-MDC violence in the 2000s — have sparked new fears amongst the opposition. On the other hand, ZANU-PF has faced numerous corruption scandals and steadily growing public frustration over its inability to improve citizens' quality of life. Infighting over political power has also grown in the party, encouraged by 89-year old Mugabe's physical and mental frailty. Mugabe is generally seen as 'the glue that holds the party together', so ZANU-PF may well dissolve into feuding factions if no suitable successor is found¹.
- The MDC, in contrast, has tried to capitalise on public discontent, presenting itself as the energetic alternative to an aged, dusty and corrupt ZANU-PF elite. This has led Tsvangirai to emerge victorious from the first round of elections in 2008, although the subsequent crisis eventually forced him to withdraw his candidacy. The MDC enjoys backing from many foreign actors in the region and from overseas. Yet the party also faces numerous problems². First, its reputation has suffered critical blows from a range of personal lapses by its leader: numerous sexual adventures of 61 year-old Tsvangirai, including the pregnancy of a 23-year old woman and his denial of paternity; reports of growing corruption and financial mismanagement within the MDC headquarters; and Tsvangirai's refusal to accept criticism of his increasingly centralised leadership style³. What is more, the MDC's participation in government for more than four years — although in a weak position — renders it increasingly difficult to argue that it could bring about a radical turn for the better. Disenchanted with the party's inability to trigger decisive change, many young urbanites —

¹ [Robert Mugabe - I want to retire but I can't](#), the Telegraph, 21 May 2012

² [Morgan Tsvangirai: A Critical View](#), Africanarguments.org, 14 January 2013

³ [Tasting Good Life, Opposition in Zimbabwe Slips Off Pedestal](#), NY Times, 12 April 2013

Public opinion has shifted, now slightly favouring ZANU-PF over the MDC.

previously the MDC's most devoted supporters — have stopped attending the party's once-overcrowded rallies and have sought other arenas to voice their discontent. Pentecostal churches have seen their popularity skyrocket, and new political alternatives have emerged, including the recently revived Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU)⁴. Evidence that MDC youth groups have engaged in violent campaigns has further undermined the party's credibility⁵.

The political outlook, as a result, has changed drastically. Recent surveys suggest that ZANU-PF by now attracts more public support than the MDC, a total turnaround from 2008/2009⁶. The MDC may yet regain control by forming a coalition with a third party. Yet Tsvangirai's chances of finding a suitable partner appear meagre, since he broke ties with a smaller MDC faction led by Welshman Ncube, and other promising parties are lacking.

The new constitution: An improvement, if not a panacea

The recent constitutional referendum offers ground for hope, but does not guarantee free and fair elections.

On 16 March 2013, Zimbabweans approved a new constitution in a referendum which was widely praised for its peaceful character. Although some observers have heralded this ballot as a dress rehearsal for the elections, such optimistic assessments neglect two crucial points:

1. The constitutional draft was supported by all major parties, while the elections will highlight dividing lines between the camps.
2. The referendum had no immediate political implications, while the election will end the current coalition cabinet and mark a return to higher stakes in the form of 'winner-takes-all' politics.

Still, the new constitution introduces some important checks and balances.

Nonetheless, the constitution — signed into law by Mugabe on 22 May — introduces various safeguards, including: the right of the parliament to oust the president, the establishment of a Constitutional Court, and the requirement that parliament approve a state of emergency. A presidential term limitation is established, albeit with no retroactive application. This effectively allows Mugabe to stand for the upcoming election and — age and health permitting — even to run again in the subsequent ballot.

Cooperation under the GNU promises an improved political dialogue.

More than four years of the GNU have also permitted a level of cross-party communication and cooperation unthinkable in 2008. Combined with the country's slight socio-economic improvements, this may hinder the spread of incendiary rhetoric that contributed to the violent crisis in the last elections⁷.

But other difficulties remain. First, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) has yet to set a polling date, although the Parliament will dissolve on 29 June 2013, and voter registration has been underway since the end of April. ZANU-PF favours early elections, owing to concerns over 89-year old Mugabe's ability to endure another campaign. The MDC, by contrast, is

⁴ [Why Zimbabwean voters are deserting Morgan Tsvangirai](#), the Guardian, 23 April 2013

⁵ [MDC-T intraparty violence escalates](#), the Zimbabwean, 16 April 2013

⁶ [Survey in Zimbabwe](#), Afrobarometer; [Change and New Politics in Zimbabwe](#), FH, 2012

⁷ [A Conversation With Tendai Biti on Zimbabwe's Elections](#), FH, 18 April 2013

Difficulties remain, including uncertainty about the date, financing and the context of the elections.

pushing for a later date, arguing that electoral reforms are needed first⁸. As for now, most experts expect the polls to take place at some point in September. Second, Zimbabwe is close to bankruptcy, raising serious concerns about financing the election. Foreign offers have been declined by Harare, citing donors' attempts to interfere with domestic proceedings. Third, electoral fraud and political violence have reappeared: Tsvangirai's office was recently raided, the human rights lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa detained, and the early phase of voter registration has been dogged by irregularities. These issues all vitiate the prospect of successful elections.

International stakeholders: Proceeding with caution and altering political goals?

International observers have watched developments, but hold little leverage.

Flickers of hope for a stronger role of international mediators have been clouded by ZANU-PF's intensifying 'anti-colonialist' rhetoric and cat-and-mouse games with donors, which included a March 2013 ban on non-African election observers⁹; an April 2013 request for UN election funding, withdrawn only days later over alleged attempts of interfering with domestic politics¹⁰; and a last-minute refusal of entry to an approved UN election assessment team in April (eventually allowed in). A delegation from the European Parliament's Development Committee travelled without disruptions in early May, but international relations remain tense.

African actors enjoy greater — though still limited — negotiating power with Harare.

As guarantors of the GPA, southern African partners exercise a stronger grip on Zimbabwe than those from further afield. South Africa's President Jacob Zuma, in particular, has been a key diplomat calling for political reform. Yet international support for ZANU-PF opponents may also undermine their credibility. Citing international sympathy for the MDC, for example, Mugabe has accused Tsvangirai of adopting foreign-imposed policies and of undermining the popular 'black empowerment' agenda.

Contrary to many expectations, a government change may have only a slim impact on democratic quality.

Against this complicated background, two main lessons emerge:

- Government turnover does not guarantee democratic change in Zimbabwe. ZANU-PF lacks democratic roots; but the MDC has, for its part, done little to prove its trustworthiness. Rather than asking *who* is in power, international analysts might want to put a stronger focus on *how* to actually improve Zimbabwe's political culture and institutions.
- Second, foreign actors need to be aware of the high degree of suspicion prevalent in Zimbabwe. The international community should act with great care to avoid unintentionally causing a counterproductive backlash.

Foreign actors need to act very carefully to avoid unintended outcomes.

⁸ [Mugabe pushes poll dates via back door](#), Zimbabwe Independent, 28 March 2013

⁹ [Zimbabwe 'bars' EU and US from observing polls](#), BBC News, 5 March 2013

¹⁰ [Zimbabwe withdraws U.N. election funding request: minister](#), Reuters, 17 April 2013