

Zimbabwe: Demolitions May be Mugabe's Biggest Mistake

Assailed on all sides by a collapsing economy and dissenters in his own party ranks, the Zimbabwean leader may have taken one step too far with his all-out campaign to destroy urban homes.

By Dzikamai Chidyausiku in Harare (Africa Reports No 40, 14-Aug-05)

With Zimbabwe's economic troubles deepening and cracks widening in his ruling Zanu PF party, President Robert Mugabe's decision to destroy thousands of homes may prove to be the great mistake that destroys him after more than a quarter of a century in power.

Such predictions have been made before, but this time it looks like President Mugabe is in real trouble, facing the biggest crisis both within his party and in the country as a whole since it became independent from Britain in 1980.

Operation Murambatsvina (Operation Drive Out the Rubbish), which led to thousands of urban homes being bulldozed and torched in the name of urban renewal, may be the catalyst for change.

Mugabe's circle of friends abroad has been getting smaller and smaller, especially among other African leaders who until recently lent him their moral support in the face of widespread condemnation of his rule from further afield.

The international pressure on Mugabe has mounted inexorably as a result of the human crisis created by the Murambatsvina campaign, which has touched the lives of more than two million of the country's 11.5 million people and left more than 200,000 families homeless.

At the same time, the government is grappling with the fastest collapsing economy in the world, with gross domestic product falling in real terms for each of the past seven years. Inflation is in triple figures, wiping out people's savings and social security funding, while unemployment has risen above 80 per cent as a result of continuing company closures.

The government lacks the resources to import fuel or food for the some 5.5 million people who international agencies say face starvation. The country's health delivery system is a shambles, with HIV/AIDS wreaking havoc and the government unable to buy medicines to combat the epidemic that claims more than 13,000 Zimbabwean lives each month.

A new report released by the Washington-based Centre for Global Development, CGD, says that in the past five years, the standard of living for Zimbabweans has fallen back more than 50 years.

"The signs of collapse are everywhere," say CGD research fellows Michael Clemens and Todd Moss. Manufacturing has fallen by 51 per cent since 1997 and exports have shrunk by half in just the last 48 months.

The report notes that Zimbabwe, once an exporter of food, now requires "massive" food aid.

The Zimbabwe dollar, once on par with its American counterpart, is now trading at 45,000 to the US dollar on the widely-used black market.

The CGD researchers concluded that, "In mid-2005 the average Zimbabwean had fallen back to that [1953] level, wiping out the income gains over the past 52 years.

"The scale and speed of this income decline is unusual outside of a war situation. In fact, the income losses in Zimbabwe have been greater than those experienced during recent conflicts in Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone."

Government policy has been characterised by “absurd” macroeconomic management as well as the “general undermining of property rights” and the damage done to agriculture by the mass appropriation of mainly white-owned farms.

“Unfortunately, the mismanagement and economic lunacy continues,” the report concludes. “This suggests that economic misrule will continue to cost Zimbabweans not only their children’s opportunities for a better life but, for many, any life at all.”

Perhaps the latest indicator of the scale of the problems is Zimbabwe’s recent approach to South Africa for a six billion rand (one billion US dollar) rescue package so that it can pay its debts to the International Monetary Fund, which is threatening expulsion, and import food. This is the first visible admission that the government has failed to extricate the economy from its self-inflicted crisis.

“Mugabe is cracking,” University of Zimbabwe political scientist Eldred Masunungure told IWPR. “He is buffeted by problems from all angles. The economy is crumbling while domestic and international pressure is mounting on him.”

Within the president’s ZANU PF party, which he has led with an iron fist for more than 30 years, loud dissenting voices about his leadership can now be heard, threatening a previously unthinkable split.

ZANU-PF is divided more than ever along clan lines, mainly between Mugabe’s Zezuru and the Karanga, the two largest clans of the wider Shona tribal grouping, while the succession battle that almost sank the party early this year remains a real threat. Nearly all the top positions in government and the military are held by Zezurus who, shielded by the President’s patronage, have accumulated vast wealth.

Party insiders insist that the group which attempted a palace coup against Mugabe’s new female vice-president, Joyce Mujuru – also a Zezuru – in December last year still remains strong enough to rock the battered ZANU PF ship. The group, led by Emmerson Mnangagwa, a Karanga and once one of Mugabe’s most trusted lieutenants, still has the clout to make a move when the question of succession to the 81-year-old president next surfaces publicly.

The budding division in ZANU PF was dealt with ruthlessly by Mugabe, who expelled six provincial chairmen – key party men who were Mnangagwa sympathisers.

“Mugabe has clipped Mnangagwa’s wings for the time being by giving him an ineffectual ministerial post [in charge of rural housing],” said Masunungure. “The succession issue, which Mugabe silenced by imposing Mujuru, is still highly divisive, with Mnangagwa waiting to pounce when Mugabe steps aside.”

Mugabe’s grooming of Mujuru to succeed him in 2008 has stirred strong emotions and widened fissures along clan lines. The Karanga provided the bulk of ZANU’s fighting forces and military leaders in the 1972-80 war against white rule, and are now bitter that they have been elbowed out of power.

Members of the Ndebele – related to South Africa’s Zulus, and Zimbabwe’s second largest tribe after the Shona – are also crumbling. Ndebeles dominated ZAPU (Zimbabwe African Peoples Union), until the party was swallowed up by ZANU PF in 1987, in a deal that followed an army assault on ZAPU supporters in western Zimbabwe, costing 20,000 lives.

Although he puts on a brave face, Mugabe now has fewer friends in the region and internationally than he had three years ago.

Even his staunchest African friends are wavering. Zimbabwe’s independent Financial Gazette reports that South African president Thabo Mbeki and Nigeria’s Olusegun Obasanjo have been pressuring Mugabe to negotiate a solution to the political crisis with Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

Mugabe has said he would sooner talk to the man he regards as his arch-enemy, British prime minister Tony Blair, than Tsvangirai.

It seems the president's reaction to the internal and external pressure is to resort to ever greater repression. Laws have been promulgated to outlaw demonstrations and political gatherings, and the media has been muzzled with newspapers closed and journalists arrested.

"All these are signs of a regime under siege from its own people," said MDC spokesman Paul Themba Nyati.

History may show that Mugabe finally pushed Zimbabwe over the edge with Operation Murambatsvina, which according to John Makumbe, a political scientist at the University of Zimbabwe, "only helped focus international attention on Zimbabwe. Mugabe is showing the world that he is a ruthless man and in the process he is losing more friends."

Furious at losing almost all urban seats in parliamentary elections last March, he launched a campaign to drive out the "rubbish" from the towns, to disastrous effect. He told millions of people to go back to where they came from, even though many had been born and brought up in the shacks that government bulldozers reduced to rubble.

The action has only widened fissures in ZANU PF, with some senior officials speaking out against the policy and threatening to quit the party. The most prominent case was the resignation last month of Pearson Mbalekwa, a party official and a former agent of the Central Intelligence Organisation.

Mbalekwa said that the demolition of homes showed that ZANU PF was no longer working for the people who elected it. The Zimbabwean leader immediately punished him by confiscating the former white-owned farm he had been given as a privileged member of the presidential inner circle.

Operation Murambatsvina impelled United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to send a special envoy to Zimbabwe. The envoy, Anna Tibaijuka, subsequently published a report lambasting the government's mass demolition of poor people's homes as inhuman. She said Mugabe had shown "indifference to human suffering" while her boss Annan described the situation as "profoundly distressing."

As his erstwhile friends tiptoe away, a desperate Mugabe has turned to China for economic support. He visited China in July looking for help, but received minimal aid. That leaves him with few places left to turn as the economy heads towards meltdown.

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