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A Sham Trial in Zimbabwe

Last week in Zimbabwe, Morgan Tsvangirai testified in court to save his life. The leader of Zimbabwe's democratic opposition, Mr. Tsvangirai is on trial for treason, a capital crime. His real crime is that he is a political opponent to President Robert Mugabe. He won 42 percent of the vote when he ran against him in 2002, in an election marked by fraud and government-sponsored violence.

Mr. Mugabe is using the courts to disable Mr. Tsvangirai and his party, the Movement for Democratic Change. Mr. Tsvangirai is accused of plotting to "eliminate" Mr. Mugabe, the evidence being a grainy, obviously doctored videotape of a 2001 meeting between Mr. Tsvangirai and Ari Ben-Menashe, a Montreal political operative the movement had hired as a lobbyist. The tape shows Mr. Ben-Menashe saying repeatedly that he could "eliminate" Mr. Mugabe. Mr. Tsvangirai then uses the word, but he has said in court that he meant eliminate Mr. Mugabe from the 2002 presidential competition.

Mr. Ben-Menashe admitted in court that before the meeting he received a \$700,000 payment from Mr. Mugabe's government. Officials have also admitted they paid Mr. Ben-Menashe to videotape the session. In other words, the case looks like a setup. But Zimbabwe's courts are subservient enough that Mr. Tsvangirai could be convicted.

If he is not, Mr. Tsvangirai has another indictment pending for treason, based on his leadership of a national strike last year. Of the 57 members of parliament who are in the Movement for Democratic Change, about 50 have been charged with crimes. Mr. Mugabe knows he can keep his hold on power only through intimidation and abuse. Zimbabweans are suffering record inflation and unemployment, and many are going hungry. International aid donors charge that the government withholds grain from areas that support the opposition.

In 1964, at the decapitation of South Africa's African National Congress leadership known as the Rivonia trial, Nelson Mandela was charged with sabotage. He was sentenced to life in prison and served 27 years, released only when the apartheid government needed a negotiating partner. His lawyer, George Bizos, today is lead counsel for Mr. Tsvangirai. The charges against him, like those against Mr. Mandela, are an indictment not of the prisoner but of the government that arrested him.

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