

**The Washington Post**

## **Glimmers of Defiance In a Wary Zimbabwe**

Discontent Evident Even in Mugabe Strongholds

By Craig Timberg  
Washington Post Foreign Service  
Tuesday, April 5, 2005; Page A14

HARARE, Zimbabwe, April 4 -- As grim resignation settled over Zimbabwe's capital, there were few visible signs that last week's parliamentary elections -- and the resulting landslide for the party of President Robert Mugabe -- had happened at all. Most people returned to the demanding business of surviving in one of the world's worst economies and put aside stirring notions of change, at least for now.

Mugabe, the vigorous and wily 81-year-old who is the only leader this nation has had in 25 years of independence, is known here variously as "Uncle Bob," "Comrade Bob" or simply "the Old Man." And he is yet again seemingly in complete command of Zimbabwe. Opposition leaders have denounced Thursday's elections, which left them with 16 fewer seats in parliament than the 57 they once held, as fraudulent, but they have publicly ruled out either a legal challenge or mass protests. A small protest attempted here Monday afternoon quickly fizzled.

Yet despite the opposition's poor showing in official results, the final days of last week's election campaign revealed a spirit of defiance rarely seen in the five previous years of increasingly authoritarian rule by Mugabe.

The main opposition group, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is viewed here as the party of urban youth, a long-term advantage in a country that increasingly is urban and young. Most Zimbabweans are not old enough to have experienced white minority rule or Mugabe's leadership of the 1970s insurrection that helped end it.

Even in the countryside -- where support for Mugabe is supposedly strongest and where official vote totals showed his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, with huge margins of victory -- voters on election day flashed the opposition's signature open-palm gesture. A group of peasant women walking down a dirt road with sugar cane in their hands did not want to talk to a stranger, but when pressed gently about the election, they silently showed their open palms.

Elsewhere, former Mugabe loyalists said that his party's dominance of the nation must end if Zimbabwe hopes to escape its international isolation and halt a precipitous economic decline.

Four men, ranging in age from their twenties to their fifties, stood on the side of the main road in a rural village west of here on voting day. Each had voted for Mugabe in all previous elections,

yet on this day they spoke openly of their dissatisfaction and their longing to see the opposition take power.

Even more strikingly in a nation where to support the opposition is to risk beating and torture, two of the four men willingly gave their names and ages to a foreign journalist, despite knowing they might appear in a newspaper that Mugabe's party officials would read. "Most people are suffering, no food, no jobs. . . . Maybe the MDC will win," said Smart Madhola, 56, a security guard.

The willingness to speak out dimmed a bit after the voting, as it became clear that the overwhelming victory of Mugabe's party had given the president an even freer hand to rewrite the constitution -- or do almost anything else he pleased.

But on Saturday, opposition activist Aiden Turai Mpani, 28, said he was prepared to demonstrate in the streets, risking almost certain arrest and beating by police, to protest election results he was certain were the result of rigging. Asked if he really wanted to be quoted by name under such conditions, he said confidently, "With pleasure."

Though violence was down in the weeks before Thursday's elections, human rights groups have reported widespread killings of opposition candidates and supporters in the past five years. Opposition leaders put the total at more than 300 since it formed in 1999.

Most Zimbabweans lack access to such reports, but they know the brutal history of Mugabe and his supporters. They know he oversaw the slaughter of as many as 20,000 Ndebeles, members of a large southern tribe that had resisted his rule, in the 1980s. They know that more recently, opposition activists often have simply disappeared or been arrested for crimes they didn't commit. They know, as human rights groups have long detailed, that torture and the withholding of food aid have been common government tactics. So has threatening to burn down the house of an opposition member -- and sometimes doing it.

On election day, a 34-year-old man in a town east of here spent several minutes explaining his eagerness for the opposition to take power. He, too, gave his name before thinking better of allowing it to be published. Even though he knew the level of violence was relatively low in this election, he also knew what had happened in 2000 and 2002.

Was he scared?

"Of course," he said simply, "from what I saw last time."

Did he know opposition supporters who had been beaten?

"A lot of people," he said.

These were not isolated conversations. To be in Zimbabwe during the past few weeks was to see unmistakable signs of widespread frustration with Mugabe. Opposition rallies throughout the nation, even in his heartland, drew loud and enthusiastic crowds. And there was little evidence

that the focus of Mugabe's campaign -- the supposed intention of British Prime Minister Tony Blair to reestablish Zimbabwe as a colony -- resonated with voters.

Those who said they supported Mugabe's party responded mostly to the powerful issue of land redistribution. Though the violent farm seizures carried out by the government in 2000 were widely criticized by Western leaders, even opposition supporters in Zimbabwe are often critical of the era that preceded them, when a tiny minority of white commercial farmers held most of the nation's best agricultural land.

Edmore Guzha, 32, the proud owner of a 12-acre farm in an area where in the past, black Zimbabweans worked mostly as laborers, said his reason for supporting Mugabe was simple: "He gave us land."

The day after the elections, some opposition supporters were so confident that they dressed up in their best clothes in expectation of a victory party. The first several hours of televised results, which showed an initial surge for the MDC, only reinforced that optimism.

But the next morning, vote totals for Mugabe's party surged. These were mostly from rural areas, where the opposition -- rooted in Zimbabwe's cities -- had not expected to prevail. Still, the extent and scale of the ruling party's victories sobered the opponents.

Seats previously held by the opposition disappeared. In some outlying areas, results ran 2-1 or 3-1 against the opposition. Mugabe's party ended up with 78 seats to the opposition's 41 and one claimed by an independent. And Mugabe would appoint 30 more members, giving him a commanding edge in a parliament with 150 seats.

Though Mugabe's handpicked observers approved the conduct of the elections, results in dozens of districts have turned up puzzling inconsistencies.

In some, the combined vote totals for individual candidates do not equal the supposed number of voters who cast ballots. In others, polling place records show a surge of voters in the final hours of balloting, a time when witnesses have generally agreed that attendance was dwindling. All told, the opposition contends that more than 50 seats were stolen.

On Saturday, Mugabe summoned reporters and representatives from the state-owned television station, the only channel most Zimbabweans can receive.

The United States, the European Union and every major human rights group active in southern Africa had already denounced the poll as badly tainted. But Mugabe had won the support of South Africa and other important neighbors, and he appeared utterly at ease as he boasted of his party's triumph. He parried with apparent relish with foreign journalists who -- except during a two-week stretch before the elections -- he had harangued and threatened with jail if they dared enter his country.

"Are you frightened?" he challenged them, smiling as he emerged onto the front patio of his elegant residence and sat down at a stately wooden table between two life-size stuffed lions. He

then suggested, with a widening grin, that he shared the lions' temperament. "They don't bite, these two."

Over the next few minutes, Mugabe dismissed charges of cheating as "excuses" that were not "sporting." He warned that any attempt by the opposition to protest the results would be met with "conflict, serious conflict." He said the government had "two or three weapons" it might deploy to calm unrest in a nation where demonstrations are illegal unless the police have granted prior, written permission.

Yet evidence that Mugabe's popularity was waning did not disappear even as the necessities of daily living reasserted themselves.

At a fast-food chicken restaurant in downtown Harare, a 25-year-old woman wearing an unusually well-made outfit was eating lunch. When a foreign journalist sought her opinion of the election results, she warily agreed to speak and went on to defend the results as free and fair, echoing Mugabe's contentions. Yet she declined to say how she had voted.

When asked about her profession, the woman identified herself as a government worker.

What kind of government worker? "Intelligence."

She worked, she explained, as an officer for the Central Intelligence Organization, Mugabe's feared secret police, whose ranks swelled this election year.

The journalist then joked that, given her job, he had a good guess how she had voted.

The woman fixed him with a gaze suggesting that in Zimbabwe things are not always as they seem, and said, "No, you don't."