

A Tale of Two Elections: Zimbabwe at the Polls in 2008¹

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Zimbabwe's politics are profoundly shaped by violence. Violence has motivated, divided and united each of Zimbabwe's political parties in distinctive ways, it has shaped their ability to mobilise, their constituencies and their ideology, it has marked successive electoral contests and it has been used to transform the state. The ruling Zanu(PF)'s 'third chimurenga', launched in 2000, is rooted in a historical narrative of violence that links the uprisings against conquest in the 1890s to the liberation war of the 1970s and the battle to reclaim the nation's white-owned farmland in 2000. For those in opposition politics, the violence of the third chimurenga evokes a different lineage: the extreme repression – known as Gukurahundi – that was launched against Zanu(PF)'s liberation-era rival Zapu in the 1980s, and the violence periodically directed at civic and political opponents of Zanu(PF) since then.²

Zimbabwe's most recent polls, held on 29 March and 27 June respectively, marked two ends of a spectrum of violence and electoral politics. The first round – for house, senate, presidency and local councils – was the least violent of the third chimurenga era and produced results that stunned

Zanu(PF). The battered and divided Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) won a parliamentary majority, while Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the larger MDC faction, received more votes than any other presidential candidate, though not enough – according to the contested official figures – to avoid a run-off. The opposition's success sparked an extremely violent reaction from the ruling party and its securocrat ideologues that led to Tsvangirai's withdrawal just days before the June run-off poll, allowing Zanu(PF)'s Robert Mugabe to claim victory. The 29 March election redeemed a popular faith in the electoral process that had waned over the past 8 years of opposition defeats. There was in its aftermath a moment of jubilation in which alternative visions of Zimbabwe's political future and a halt to its record-breaking economic decline seemed possible. The presidential run-off went a long way toward undermining this briefly renewed faith in the power of the vote and to laying bare the deeply problematic nature of both the liberation-struggle logic and the militarised means by which Zanu(PF) sustains its claims to power.

It would be a mistake, however, to see the foregoing as simply the triumph of crude authoritarianism, rooted in coercion, over a revived democratic idealism. Both Zanu(PF) and the MDC are too complex, compromised and divided to allow for so simple an analysis, and the behaviour of both is shaped by a state that carries in its fractured institutions contradictory logics and practices, bureaucratic and law-bound as well as partisan and coercive. It is in interstices and divisions of this kind (within and between the parties and within and between state institutions) that the struggle for Zimbabwe's political future is being fought, and it is on this varied terrain that any power-sharing agreement among the parties will need to take root. With these considerations in mind, we explore the two rounds of recent elections and then go on to reflect on the future of violent politics in Zimbabwe.

The March 29 Elections

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2. Zanu (PF) is the Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front); Zapu is the Zimbabwe African People's Union. The violence of Gukurahundi was focused on the western Matabeleland provinces, home to Zimbabwe's Ndebele-speaking minority, and Zapu's stronghold. As a consequence of the campaign of violence, Zapu was absorbed by Zanu(PF) under the Unity Accord of 1987.

It is not too much of an oversimplification to argue that violence has been an essential glue for Zanu(PF), necessary to both the maintenance of party discipline and electoral success, while it has played the opposite role for the opposition, constantly threatening the MDC's capacity, integrity and unity.

That the MDC has struggled to maintain unity is not surprising. It is a young party with inexperienced leadership and diverse constituencies, from trade unionists to civics, professionals and students to white farmers and farm workers, all of whom have faced extraordinary pressures almost since the moment of the party's inception in 1999. On top of massive job losses, extreme economic hardship and targeted, violent repression, hundreds of thousands of MDC supporters were displaced and at times disenfranchised as a result of the seizure, occupation and chaotic resettlement of the vast majority of Zimbabwe's white-owned large scale farms from 2000 and the urban 'clean up' operation of 2005, known as Operation Murambatsvina, under which unplanned and 'illegal' homes were destroyed on a massive scale.³ The communal areas, where black smallholders lived, faced increasing surveillance by the hierarchy of officially recognised chiefs, headmen and village heads, who were now called upon to play a partisan role alongside war veterans, militias and Zanu(PF) functionaries, and the use of access to food (and often to services and land) to enforce political loyalty in a series of drought seasons. Many MDC supporters left the country in search of jobs and safety.

The MDC's response to its repeated electoral losses and the anger and organisational weaknesses produced by these pressures was to develop parallel structures outside the party's main organs, run by

young 'militants' and answerable to a handful of leaders allied to Morgan Tsvangirai. These measures resulted from Zanu(PF) repression and the need to organise against it, but in practice they fostered secrecy, distrust and a 'culture of violence' within the party that echoed that of Zanu(PF) and produced heated disputes over the role of democracy and the accountability of leaders.⁴ After years of dissension, the MDC split in late 2005 over these issues and growing regionalist and ethnic tensions.⁵ Many of the leading lights of the party, including Secretary General Welshman Ncube and Vice President Gibson Sibanda, broke away to form a new MDC under the leadership of former student leader and robotics professor Arthur Mutambara. Morgan Tsvangirai remained as leader of the larger MDC formation, which would come to be known as MDC-T.

In the year prior to the 2008 elections, a systematic attack on the MDC leadership and structures in Harare, overwhelmingly focused on MDC-T, reinforced divisions within the opposition and further undermined its organisational capacity. Both MDCs launched campaigns for the 2008 elections in early 2007, while civic groups organised protests around economic and human rights issues. Zanu(PF)'s response to this renewed activism was to target political and civic leaders, from national to constituency levels. The most notorious incident occurred on 11 March 2007 when a 'prayer meeting' called by the Save Zimbabwe Campaign, a coalition of civic organisations and churches, and both MDCs was set upon by riot police.⁶ Morgan

3. On land see Jocelyn Alexander, *The unsettled land: state-making and the politics of land in Zimbabwe 1893-2003*, James Currey, Oxford, 2006. On Operation Murambatsvina, see Debby Potts, 'Restoring order? Operation Murambatsvina and the urban crisis in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32, 2, 2006 and further below.

4. See Adrienne LeBas, 'The politics of collapse: political responses to violence and displacement in Zimbabwe', paper presented to the conference on political economies of displacement in post-2000 Zimbabwe, Johannesburg, 9-11 June 2008.

5. The best account is Brian Raftopoulos, 'Reflections on opposition politics in Zimbabwe: The politics of the Movement for Democratic Change', in B. Raftopoulos and K. Alexander (eds), *Reflections on Democratic Politics in Zimbabwe*, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town, 2006.

6. See Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Bashing dissent: escalating violence and state repression in Zimbabwe*, vol. 19, no. 6(A), May 2007.

Tsvangirai and other leaders were viciously beaten in and outside police custody. Tsvangirai's stronghold in Harare was subsequently subjected to a campaign of abductions, torture and police intimidation. Mutambara and his supporters received less attention, a difference Mugabe justified on the grounds that Tsvangirai did not 'know how to behave', in contrast to Mutambara.⁷ This was coded language for a broader discourse which painted Tsvangirai, the trade unionist and grade school graduate, as an uneducated 'boy' unworthy of the company of men with university degrees, a tactic that has long been used in nationalist politics.⁸ For Mugabe, Tsvangirai's ambitions were 'hollow' because they were 'not clothed in any greater understanding and intellectual appreciation'.⁹

This history of divisive pressure ensured that the MDC factions were not only much weakened, but also that they treated one another with suspicion and even paranoia. The MDC factions' attempts to reunite before the 2008 polls fell apart in February, apparently owing to the Tsvangirai MDC's decision 'to establish its dominance in both its existing areas of support and in those areas claimed as strongholds by the MDC Mutambara', notably the western Matabeleland regions where the MDC had won by large majorities in previous elections, and from which many of the most influential leaders of the Mutambara MDC hailed.¹⁰ The violence and division within the MDC deeply demoralised a party whose mantra was democracy, human rights, and tolerance, and that had been born not least out of the horror of Zanu(PF)'s past uses of violence.

If violence threatened the MDC's very identity as well as its unity, it formed an essential part of

Zanu(PF)'s efforts to maintain party discipline and support. Zanu(PF) faced serious challenges in 2008. Prime among them was its inability to control Zimbabwe's planet-leading rates of economic contraction and record-breaking inflation (officially over 2 million percent in July 2008). In language tired from years of repetition, Zanu(PF) sought to blame everything from the very existence of the opposition to the devastated economy on the country's neo-imperial enemies abroad. It portrayed itself as engaged in mortal combat with the MDC and its allies who together had impoverished the people through the imposition of sanctions. Populist price controls and, in the run up to the elections, the distribution of various perks, from football team sponsorship to T-shirts and food, did little to convince that Zanu(PF) could relieve people's misery.¹¹

Economic pressure not only threatened to undermine Zanu(PF)'s voter base, but it also fed into the ongoing succession struggle that bubbled under the party's seemingly smooth surface. Two main factions, reportedly led by retired General Solomon Mujuru and former Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) head and Rural Housing Minister Emmerson Mnangagwa, had been maneuvering in more or less visible ways for years but had not succeeded in out-flanking Mugabe. Zanu(PF) had disciplined its own with a combination of threat, enticement and ideological argument since 2000, with the effect of consistently rewarding those 'hardliners' willing to employ violence against their opponents (inside and outside the party) and to proclaim their undiluted allegiance to the third chimurenga.¹²

The March elections brought an additional element into the mix in the shape of the new 'dawn'

7. Solidarity Peace Trust (SPT), *Destructive engagement: Violence, mediation and politics in Zimbabwe*, Johannesburg, 10 July 2007, p. 16, and see pp. 20-21.

8. See Geoffrey Nyarota, 'Politics, the educated elite and related matters', *The Zimbabwe Times*, 14 August 2008.

9. Blessing-Miles Tendi, 'Wanted: Politicians with degrees in people', *New Zimbabwe*, 22 February 2008.

10. SPT, *Punishing dissent, silencing citizens: The Zimbabwe elections 2008*, Johannesburg, 21 May 2008, p. 10.

11. See Busani Mpfu, 'The battle for electoral turf in Bulawayo's townships in the March 29 2008 harmonised elections', ms., 2008.

12. See Adrienne LeBas, 'Polarization as craft: party formation and state violence in Zimbabwe', *Comparative Politics*, July 2006, on the violent and other techniques used to police Zanu(PF)'s internal divisions and recentralise power within the party since 2000.

promised by former Zanu(PF) Minister of Finance Simba Makoni's entrance into the presidential race as an independent.¹³ Makoni's candidature, launched in February, sparked a vitriolic reaction from Mugabe, who labelled Makoni a prostitute, and an inept one at that – at least prostitutes had clients, the president argued – and likened him to an over-inflated frog.¹⁴ This was a variation at least on the endless repetition of the epithet 'puppet' for Tsvangirai. (Ironically it was the Tsvangirai camp that suggested Makoni was a 'stooge' of the West.)¹⁵ Makoni seemed to offer a new threat. He was seen by many as a possible route to Zanu(PF) renewal in a version acceptable to the West and to Zimbabwe's powerful South African neighbour. Makoni carefully positioned himself as a reformer who would revive not destroy Zanu(PF) and as a technocrat who could fix the economy, something Mugabe and his hardliners patently could not. Feverish rumours regarding which factions within Zanu(PF) had pledged their support to Makoni abounded in the media, beerhalls and halls of power, with favourite choices including Mujuru and retired General Vitalis Zvinavashe.¹⁶

Makoni's campaign was followed from modest rally to modest rally by an excited international and independent Zimbabwean press, but it soon became apparent that it was disorganised, underfunded, and vulnerable to Zanu(PF) obstruction.¹⁷ In the end the

only Zanu(PF) heavyweight who backed Makoni was Dumiso Dabengwa, a man who commanded some respect in the western regions of Matabeleland for his legendary role as head of Zapu's military intelligence in the liberation war, but who had been unable to win an election for Zanu(PF) since 2000.¹⁸ It seemed the price of leaving Zanu(PF) for a rapidly darkening dawn was too steep. Makoni's rumoured supporters retreated into the party fold.

If Makoni did not divide Zanu(PF), he did play into the MDC's divisions. Having failed to reach an agreement with Tsvangirai, Mutambara's MDC decided to back Makoni's doomed bid for President, while still fielding its own candidates for the parliamentary elections. In many seats two – and sometimes three, owing to further divisions within MDC-T¹⁹ – opposition candidates faced a single Zanu(PF) rival.

The parlous state of the opposition, the failure of Makoni to attract substantial support, and the distractions of succession politics, contributed to Zanu(PF)'s 'complacency', as Mugabe put it, and so to the fact that it waged a campaign less violent than in previous years.²⁰ An additional restraining factor on the use of violence was the critical response of the 15-nation Southern African Development Community (SADC) to the 11 March 2007 attacks on MDC and civic leaders noted above. In their aftermath, the SADC mandated South African President Thabo Mbeki to lead negotiations between the MDCs and Zanu(PF). Though these negotiations were roundly criticised for their evasions and Zanu(PF)'s continued use of violence while negotiating, they did produce some changes to the playing field before they were

13. See accounts in Norma Kriger, 'Can elections end Mugabe's dictatorship?', *Association of Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin*, 79, Spring 2008; Brian Raftopoulos, 'The "frog" and the "puppet": The Makoni moment and opposition politics in Zimbabwe', *Perspectives*, 2, 2008; Shari Eppel, 'Matabeleland: Its struggle for legitimacy and the relevance of this in the 2008 election', *Perspectives*, 2, 2008.

14. 'Mugabe tightens his grip', *Mail and Guardian*, 3 March 2008.

15. 'Bennett says western diplomats want to impose Makoni', SW Radio Africa Hot Seat, 22 February 2008.

16. International Crisis Group, 'Zimbabwe: prospects from a flawed election', Africa Report No. 138, Washington, DC, 20 March 2008; Raftopoulos, 'The "frog"'; LeBas, 'The politics of collapse'.

17. See 'CIO disrupt Makoni Plan', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 29 February 2008.

18. Following Zapu's absorption by Zanu(PF) in 1987 Dabengwa had become a Zanu(PF) minister.

19. Even after the formation of the Mutambara MDC, MDC-T was plagued by divisions caused by power struggles, personality politics and the imposition of electoral candidates from the centre.

20. 'Mugabe urges party unity, vigorous campaign', *China View*, 17 May 2008; 'Party must unite: President', *The Herald*, 26 May 2008.

broken off as a result of Mugabe's unilateral setting of an election date in January 2008. Key repressive and electoral laws were amended, allowing 'limited yet important openings in the political sphere', and crucially requiring the public posting of results outside each polling station, an innovation which was to allow the opposition to track and publicise the vote tallies as they emerged.²¹ This was still a far from level playing field,²² but it did allow the MDCs to campaign in rural areas with a freedom not enjoyed since 2000.²³

On the campaign trail, Tsvangirai drew huge crowds. His party's slick and positive advertising campaign, with its emphasis on political change, economic recovery, and promises of compensation and truth-telling about past state atrocities, held a wide appeal. It stood in stark contrast to Zanu(PF)'s name-calling and threats and the ubiquitous pictures of a fist-waving Mugabe. Zanu(PF) promised – as it had for years – that 'Zimbabwe will never be a colony again'. Zanu(PF) would 'punish and forever silence puppet sanctions-mongers'.²⁴

Zanu(PF) had not lost its capacity to mobilise – clientelism, coercion and ideological appeals still carried significant weight. However, the relative lack of violence, and the opening of political space it allowed, was sufficient for Zanu(PF) to lose its advantage. In the parliamentary vote, MDC-T swept Harare (as expected) save for one anomalous constituency; Zanu(PF) won under 20% of the vote in 18 of 23 constituencies. MDC-T also swept Bulawayo where the Mutambara MDC had been expected to do well owing to its ticket of Matabeleland heavyweights. Urban voters stuck to parties not individuals: in Bulawayo and Harare relative unknowns on the MDC-T ticket beat well known incumbents on the Mutambara ticket.²⁵ The

Mutambara MDC seems to have been badly hurt by the decision to back Makoni, who was seen by many as in effect Zanu(PF), by its lack of resources and negative campaigning against Tsvangirai, as well as a low voter turnout.²⁶ The greatest shock was delivered to Zanu(PF) in its rural strongholds. MDC-T made serious inroads in the Mashonaland heartland, as well as other rural areas. As LeBas shows, Zanu(PF) polled between 10% and 30% fewer voters in its core constituencies compared to earlier elections. Its loss of vote share was greatest where it had previously had the highest levels of support.²⁷

Of the 210 parliamentary seats on offer, the MDC-T won 99 seats, Mutambara's MDC won 10 (entirely in rural Matabeleland), and Zanu(PF) won 97. An additional seat was won by Jonathan Moyo, famous former Zanu(PF) Minister of Information, standing as an Independent in his home constituency of Tsholotsho, while three seats were delayed due to the untimely deaths of candidates. Of the latter, two were eventually won by Zanu(PF), and one by MDC-T. The opposition's weaknesses and divisions did not prevent a MDC-T victory, but they were still costly: the combined MDC votes would have beaten Zanu(PF) in an additional 10 constituencies, thereby producing a far safer MDC majority in parliament.²⁸

As the results flowed in officially and unofficially, via a slow drip of pronouncements from the official Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and a much more rapid outpouring from the MDC and from text messages and pictures on people's cell phones of results posted at each station, a sense of euphoria took over in the MDC-T camp and of foreboding among Zanu(PF). But then a delay was carefully engineered: the presidential results were not officially announced until May 2, and while they confirmed a Tsvangirai victory, they did not

21. SPT, *Punishing dissent*, pp. 10-11.

22. E.g., HRW, *All over again: Human rights abuses and flawed electoral conditions in Zimbabwe's coming general elections*, vol. 20, no. 2(A), March 2008.

23. SPT, *Punishing dissent*, p. 11, and see pp. 21, 32. Kriger, 'Can elections end Mugabe's dictatorship?', pp. 1-2.

24. See posters reproduced in SPT, *Punishing dissent*, p. 60.

25. LeBas, 'The politics of collapse'.

26. Mpfu, 'The battle for electoral turf'.

27. LeBas, 'The politics of collapse', pp. 25-26. Also see HRW, 'Bullets for each of you': state-sponsored violence since Zimbabwe's March 29 elections, June 2008.

28. See 'Opposition split propels ZANU PF', *Financial Gazette*, 6 April 2008.

give him the necessary 50% plus one vote necessary to avoid a run-off, an outcome that sparked much suspicion. The ZEC also undertook recounts in 23 constituencies – sparking fears of post-facto rigging, though the results remained unchanged. The public posting of the vote tallies meant ‘no one can privatise the result’, as MDC Secretary General Tendai Biti put it,²⁹ but it also meant that who voted for whom was known at the local levels, a fact that would return to haunt the opposition in the violent onslaught that was to come.

The June 27 Presidential Run-off

Zanu(PF)'s response to its surprise defeat on the 29th of March was at first unclear. Would there be an offer of power-sharing? Would there be an abdication? Rumours abounded of Zanu(PF) approaches to Tsvangirai (later confirmed by Tsvangirai) to discuss a Mugabe concession or some form of power-sharing.³⁰ People feverishly sent texts and e-mails to one another speculating as to whether ‘the old man’ was really down and out. An initial optimism among MDC supporters rapidly turned to worry as the delays dragged on and talk of meetings at the highest levels of Zanu(PF) and the security forces filtered out.

The story that eventually emerged suggested that the Joint Operations Command or JOC, made up of the heads of the army, air force, prison service, police and CIO, and reportedly led by Emmerson Mnangagwa, decided within days of the election to deploy a strategy of delay and violence in order to hold onto the all-important executive.³¹ Succession politics played a role once again: as noted, since 2000 those in Zanu(PF) who defended the third

chimurenga most vocally and adopted strategies of violence flourished. Mnangagwa was a presidential hopeful who had recovered from a precipitous fall from favour in 2004 by backing Mugabe's candidature at Zanu(PF)'s controversial December 2007 congress, thereby thwarting rival faction leader Solomon Mujuru. Mnangagwa and his allies sought to guarantee Mugabe's survival, secure his favour, and so reinvigorate their claim to succession. Mnangagwa even took on the role of Mugabe's election agent.

That the JOC was intimately involved in the decision to wage violence is telling. Since 2000, Zimbabwe's state has been described as increasingly ‘militarised’, with military men being appointed in key positions throughout the state, and an expanding range of decisions and actions being taken by the military, from political strategy to the formulation and implementation of agrarian and economic policy.³² The removal of decision-making authority from the once mighty ministerial bureaucracies of the Zimbabwean state had started in the 1990s, crucially around the land issue.³³ Then it had been the party that had begun to tread where the experts had once held sway. Now it seemed even the Zanu(PF) politburo had to follow the JOC's lead.³⁴ The JOC had also openly entered the political field, declaring in 2002 that the security forces could ‘not accept, let alone support or salute’ anyone without liberation struggle credentials, meaning of course Tsvangirai.³⁵ Such threats were regularly repeated.³⁶ The security force chiefs purported to speak for Zimbabwe's sovereignty; they also sought to protect their power and the business empires many of them had amassed.

29. Quoted in Chris McGreal, ‘Secret Mugabe meeting ponders military move or fixed result – but not admission of defeat’, *The Guardian*, 1 April 2008. McGreal reported that the MDC had photographed the vote tallies at over 8,000 of 9,000 polling stations.

30. See Morgan Tsvangirai interview on BBC Hardtalk, 17 April 2008.

31. See Kriger, ‘Can elections’, pp. 2-3; SPT, *Punishing Dissent*; ‘Inside Mugabe's violent crackdown’, *Washington Post*, 5 July 2008; Cuthbert Nzou, ‘Hawkish ally leads Mugabe fightback’, *ZimOnline*, 30 April 2008.

32. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, ‘Nationalist-Military alliance in Zimbabwe and the fate of democracy’, *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 6, 1, 2006, pp. 49-80.

33. See Angus Selby's account of this period, ‘Commercial farmers and the state: Interest group politics and land reform in Zimbabwe’, DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2006.

34. On land issues, see e.g., ‘Vice-president pleads with army to stop farm seizures’, *ZimOnline*, 1 October 2007.

35. ‘Army deals blow to Mugabe rival’, BBC, 9 January 2002.

36. Interview by Blessing-Miles Tendi with Constantine Chiwenga, 3 September 2006.

When Mugabe wobbled, they stepped in to ensure his and Zanu(PF)'s survival.

The coercive nature of the response followed from the locus of the decision-making and the analysis that the MDC had won because it had been allowed too much political space. Zanu(PF) is of course no stranger to violence. It had used violence in every previous election, by far the most dramatically in 1985 when it faced Zapu at the polls.³⁷ The modus operandi specific to the 1985 elections could be read once more in the spread of violence in April and May 2008. This was no coincidence: several members of the JOC – most notoriously Perence Shiri and Emmerson Mnangagwa – had been directly involved in the 1980s violence.³⁸

Another Kenya?

In the aftermath of the March polls, there was much talk in and out of Zimbabwe of parallels with Kenya's recent and bloody elections. The government warned the opposition not to 'try a Kenya'; some people talked of doing so.³⁹ There were parallels in the popular belief in illegitimate electoral practices, the spread of violence, the high stakes involved in winning control of a too-powerful executive, disagreements among elites over the 'rules of the game', and a stalemate that seemed only capable of resolution by negotiation. But a closer comparison specifically of patterns of violence shows how different these cases were. Analysts of Kenya have argued that the post-election violence that gripped that country in early 2008 took the form that it did owing to the long-standing processes by which the state had abdicated or lost its monopoly on violence (in part as a result of promoting political violence by paramilitary and non-state actors), the unstable, clientelist and ethnically driven nature of party politics, and the

exploitable nature of historical grievances over land. The violence differed markedly across constituencies, was driven by local militias and gangs, sometimes allied to particular politicians but often acting with autonomy, and was aimed overwhelmingly at people defined as ethnic 'others' and 'immigrants'.⁴⁰

Zimbabwe was different. The state had not lost its monopoly on violence. The security forces were the key organisers and perpetrators of violence, often using party youth or youth militias (trained and deployed from 2001), and veterans (effectively mobilised by Zanu(PF) in 1997), to carry out beatings, intimidation and torture, but with senior military, intelligence and political coordination. In April key figures – named in human rights reports – directed violence and the establishment of 'bases' for youth militia and veterans at clinics, schools, formerly white-owned farms and other venues.⁴¹ Over time, the day-to-day implementation of the violence was devolved to the militias, who were in May and June the predominant perpetrators of violence, but with ongoing direction by senior officials. Unlike Kenya, there were no incidents where gangs and militias in effect took control of towns or rural areas: there were no 'virtual shadow states'.⁴² This was centrally orchestrated violence, and it was also – again in stark contrast to Kenya – almost entirely one-sided. Isolated incidents where MDC supporters struck back proved the rule. Human rights groups estimated that just one per cent of violent incidents could be attributed to the MDC, while 102 of 106 political murders confirmed between April and June were of MDC supporters

37. For continuities, see Norma Kriger, 'Zanu(PF) strategies in general elections, 1980-2000: Discourse and coercion', *African Affairs*, 104, 414, 2005, pp. 1-34.

38. SPT, *Desperately Seeking Sanity*, p. 23.

39. See Terence Ranger, 'Elections and identities in Kenya and Zimbabwe', Opening address to Britain Zimbabwe Society workshop, Oxford, 27 June 2008, for a series of illuminating comparisons.

40. See the excellent issue of the *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 2, 2, 2008, devoted to the Kenyan elections, especially Susanne D. Mueller, 'The Political Economy of Kenya's Crisis', pp. 185-210, and David Anderson and Emma Lochery, 'Violence and Exodus in Kenya's Rift Valley, 2008: Predictable and Preventable?', pp. 328-343.

41. See the excellent reports by SPT, *Punishing dissent and Desperately seeking sanity*, and HRW, 'Bullets for each of you'.

42. Mueller, 'The political economy', p. 193.

and were carried out by Zanu(PF) allies or state actors.⁴³

The targets of violence were overwhelmingly MDC leaders and constituencies, not ethnic 'others'. This was an ideologically driven battle, as much of the post-2000 violence had been: ideas mattered, something that seems to be almost entirely absent in explanations of Kenyan violence. The foregoing accounts for differences in both the practices and language of violence and the far harder boundaries between parties in Zimbabwe.⁴⁴ Where the opposition is characterised as traitorous to the nation, in league with foreign powers, and in effect beyond the protection of the law, the easy side-switching seen among Kenyan politicians is difficult: there was virtually no side-switching between MDC and Zanu(PF) politicians.⁴⁵ The deep polarisations of Zimbabwean politics that this state of affairs underscores emerged repeatedly in understandings of the meaning of the vote. In the run-up to the run-off, Zanu(PF) Publicity Secretary George Charamba wondered how 'a mere X on a piece of paper, all done in time shorter than life-creating ecstasy, can steal a free people, steal a heritage, steal a freedom, steal a land, steal a future'; 'we will have to shoot – yes shoot – the ballot box for the preservation of our independence.'⁴⁶ How could the pen beat the gun? How could it beat God? Mugabe declared that, 'The MDC will never be allowed to rule this country – never ever. Only God, who appointed me, will remove me – not the MDC, not the British.'⁴⁷

Zanu(PF) statements indicated little reason for the MDC to participate in elections. But they did not mean that Zanu(PF) did not care about winning the vote. It cared deeply. The run-off violence was first and foremost retribution for having dared to vote 'wrongly'. Code-named Operation Mavhoterapapi ('where did you put your cross?'), it aimed to punish, terrorise and re-educate on a model that drew explicitly on the liberation war of the 1970s. Pungwes – the night time meetings guerrillas used to mobilise during the liberation war – were held in which 'sell-outs' were beaten, slogans chanted, and MDC supporters forced to bring forward and burn their party regalia. Political loyalty had to be publicly displayed; violence was put to use as a form of edification.

Given this logic, the focus of the worst violence in Zanu(PF) strongholds made sense. As the Solidarity Peace Trust has shown in painstaking detail, 'In areas in Mashonaland East and Central in particular, wards and villages that had shown a high MDC vote were mercilessly targeted, in what can be seen as both a policy of punishment for "betraying" ZANU, and a pre-emptive strike ahead of the run off.'⁴⁸ The local level polling station results were now used to target MDC voters. Villages were singled out as were known activists – people who had campaigned openly days and weeks before. These were exceptionally brutal attacks involving prolonged and crippling torture, massacres and abductions. Where MDC officials were not found at their homes, their spouses, children and parents were treated as surrogates.⁴⁹

There was also a fresh wave of violent farm invasions in which over 130 of the few remaining white farmers were reportedly evicted within weeks.⁵⁰ Mugabe promised 'the colonists' that this was the 'final solution', while the state media suggested that white farmers who had left the

43. SPT, *Desperately seeking sanity*, pp. 20, 25, 35, 38; SPT, *Punishing dissent*, p. 30.

44. See Blessing-Miles Tendi, 'Zimbabwe's third *chimurenga*: The use and abuse of history', DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2008.

45. LeBas, 'The politics of collapse'. On the fluidity of Kenya's political parties and their 'non-programmatic clientist' nature, see Mueller, 'The political economy', pp. 199-202.

46. *The Herald*, 3 May 2008.

47. Rowan Philip and Dominic Mahlangu, 'Only God will remove me!', *Sunday Times*, 22 June 2008.

48. SPT, *Desperately seeking sanity*, p. 28.

49. SPT, *Desperately seeking sanity*, p. 29; SPT, *Punishing dissent*, pp. 36-7.

50. 'Over 130 white farmers evicted in 3 weeks: CFU', *ZimOnline*, 17 April 2008.

country were returning in numbers to repossess their farms in anticipation of an MDC victory. They were – quite absurdly – accused of attacking innocent veterans, and of seeking to re-establish the colonial order.⁵¹ This centrally directed and ideologically driven assault was a far cry from the locally orchestrated and ethnically framed land struggles of Kenya.

In a change of strategy in May and June, ‘bases’ were set up in the MDC stronghold of Harare, and spread through the entire city, even (for the first time) in the plushest of the capital’s suburbs. Beatings and attacks on property were common as was forced attendance at all night pungwes at the bases. There were murders of a number of MDC politicians and their families, as well as reports of death lists of key grassroots activists, some of whom were abducted and killed with a professional ruthlessness.⁵² The bodies of some abducted activists have been found dumped on farms and in hospitals and morgues; many are simply missing. The funerals of those killed became public events in which senior politicians participated, and the dead were remembered as martyrs.⁵³

MDC leaders, activists and sympathisers were also jailed on a large scale. Not even the most senior escaped: dozens of MPs were arrested; Morgan Tsvangirai was detained repeatedly, and MDC-T Secretary General Tendai Biti was jailed on charges of treason. As they had for some years, arrests served as a form of immediate punishment: without any conviction, or even the pretext of obtaining a conviction, MDC activists could be held, beaten, tortured, and subjected to dehumanising conditions

characterised by severe overcrowding and compounded by a lack of food, ablution facilities, mosquito and lice infestation and the threat of serious disease.⁵⁴

On 5 July the MDC released a statement summing up the toll of violence: over 1,500 of its activists, including 20 MPs and parliamentary candidates, were said to be in police custody on charges related to political violence. A total of 103 supporters had been killed. About 5,000 supporters, including many polling agents and council candidates, were missing after having been abducted. Many more were in hiding or in hospital. This was carefully targeted violence intended to ‘decimate the party and its structures’.⁵⁵

The door to political space that had opened, however imperfectly, prior to the March elections had been viciously slammed shut. It became impossible for the MDC to hold any public meetings whatsoever, even in the stronghold of Harare, while the state press allowed the MDC no voice, refusing even to take paid advertisements, and covered the goings on as if it was the opposition that posed a threat to public order.⁵⁶ Morgan Tsvangirai and his Secretary General Tendai Biti spent much of the period (when they were not detained) outside the country on a regional and continental tour, seeking African support. The party was left rudderless for long periods, and some criticised Tsvangirai for abandoning his followers back home.⁵⁷ In the end, the violence led Tsvangirai to withdraw from the election just days before the poll, handing Mugabe a hollow victory. Mugabe

51. Amy Ansell, ‘Operation “final solution”: Intimidation and violence against white farmers in post-election Zimbabwe’, *Association of Concerned African Scholars*, 79, 2008, pp. 1-8.

52. SPT, *Desperately seeking sanity*, p. 21.

53. See e.g., Jonga Kandemiiri, ‘Zimbabwe opposition buries one slain activist while another succumbs to injuries’, VOA News, 17 July 2008; Marlon Zakeyo, ‘What Price for Peace?’, 7 August 2008, http://changezimbabwe.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=15.

54. SPT, *Desperately Seeking Sanity*, p. 23. In a 2005 study of nearly 2,000 political arrests since 2000, the SPT found that only 4 convictions were made, none for crimes of violence. SPT, ‘Policing the State’, September 2005.

55. ‘1,500 MDC activists in jail, youth leader hospitalised’, Statement of MDC Information and Publicity Department, *ZimOnline*, 5 July 2008.

56. Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe, ‘Statement on the performance of the “public” media during the 2008 presidential run-off election campaign’, Harare, 27 June 2008.

57. See the critical account of Stephen Chan, ‘The tragedy of Morgan Tsvangirai’, *Prospect Magazine*, August 2008.

was hurriedly sworn in and once again claimed to be the legitimately elected President of Zimbabwe.

Unlike previous elections, however, the brazen violence and manipulations of this round were not brushed under the carpet by the region's governments. Zambia and Botswana, both of which had a track record of criticising Zanu(PF), were most forthright in their condemnation, but there were also critical words from leading members of the ANC (other than Mbeki), the ANC Alliance and Tanzania. Crucially, the SADC judged that the election 'did not represent the will of the people of Zimbabwe', and pushed for a renewal of the Mbeki-led negotiations between the MDCs and Zanu(PF). On July 21 Mugabe, Tsvangirai and Mutambara signed a Memorandum of Understanding establishing the conditions for talks, effectively picking up where they had left off in January.⁵⁸

Living with the unexpected

Zimbabwe's elections form part of a broader landscape changed by violence. An important strand of writing on Zimbabwe since 2000 has emphasised how inexplicable and unpredictable life has become there. The things that once seemed to define Zimbabwean aspirations and expectations – the promise of progress, due reward for hard work, predictable, formal institutions and rules – have been distorted by arbitrariness, economic collapse and, crucially, by violence.

Jeremy Jones has explored the suspension of the norms and rules surrounding what Zimbabweans understand as 'real work' caused by economic collapse.⁵⁹ 'Real work' was associated with wage labour, masculine adulthood and a 'straight' life of sincerity, openness, legality and bureaucracy. It was the ideal. The reality was what was popularly known as 'kukiya-kiya', a word denoting crooked,

opportunistic, only marginally (if at all) legal practices that exploited the distortions of a hyper-inflationary, fast contracting economy. The young men of Chitungwiza town (located 30 kilometres outside Harare) to whom Jones spoke expressed their 'anger and wonder' in the face of what the economy was, as opposed to what it was supposed to be. Their anger and wonder was a mark of the speed with which the formal economy, and its attendant social symbols, institutions and values, had been shattered, leaving in its wake a state of confusion and nostalgia, corroded institutions and extreme hardship.

There are parallels in the political sphere. Since the start of the third chimurenga Zimbabweans have expressed anger and wonder at the actions of their government, and specifically with the ways in which it used violence to deliberately, if only ever partially, abrogate the law and undo a bureaucratic mode of governance. Commentators wrote of the 'normalising of the abnormal', of how 'launching the unexpected' had become a 'government "trade mark"'.⁶⁰ The land occupations required the construction of new forms of authority and the violent dismantling of old ones. Even so, echoes of the desire for planning and order lived on in the modalities of land pegging and settlement in straight lines, and in the government's concerted efforts to legalise its actions after the fact.⁶¹ Governance increasingly proceeded by the militaristic announcement of 'operations', none more devastating than Operation Murambatsvina – operation 'clean up the filth', or 'restore order' in its English version. Directed at illegal housing and informal traders in urban areas, it resulted in the

58. See the succinct account in SPT, *Desperately seeking sanity*, pp. 8-13.

59. Jeremy Jones, "Nothing is straight in Zimbabwe": The rise of the *Kukiya-kiya* economy 2000-2008', paper presented to the conference on 'political economies of displacement in post-2000 Zimbabwe', Johannesburg, 9-11 June 2008.

60. Masipula Sithole, 'Public Eye', *Financial Gazette*, 28 March 2001, and Joost Fontein, 'Anticipating the tsunami: Rumours, planning and the arbitrary state in Zimbabwe', *Africa*, forthcoming, respectively.

61. See contributions on land and local politics in Amanda Hammar, Brian Raftopoulos and Stig Jensen, *Zimbabwe's unfinished business: Rethinking land, state and nation in the context of crisis*, Harare, Weaver Press, 2003; JoAnn McGregor, 'The Politics of Disruption: War Veterans and the Local State in Zimbabwe', *African Affairs*, 101, 402, 2002, pp. 9-37.

destruction of the homes and/or livelihoods of over 700,000 people. As Joost Fontein writes, it was experienced as both a reassertion of a recognisable – and desirable – set of commitments to ‘order’ embodied in bye-laws and planning documents, and arbitrary, partisan violence.⁶²

Everywhere state violence, still entwined with bureaucracy and the law, brought new and unexpected forms of power that threatened Zimbabweans’ understanding of themselves as citizens. Nonetheless, the civic and political opposition, while all too aware of the unpredictable and coercive aspects of the state, has continued to appeal to the state not (or not just) in its guise as the creature of Zanu(PF) repression, but also as a set of institutions still answerable to rights-bearing citizens. Such behaviour is rooted in decades-old strands of nationalist thinking, practices of the state in much of the post-independence period when the judiciary fought hard to protect its independence, the police solved crimes, teachers taught and doctors healed, and in the rights-focused and non-violent civic and opposition politics that emerged so powerfully in the 1990s. The legalistic strategies that have marked so much of MDC politics (controversially – there have always been pressures to adopt ‘other means’) speak of a powerful liberal political imaginary.⁶³ MDC and civic activists report crimes, even political crimes, to the police even now,⁶⁴ and they have gone to court again and

again, demanding that the state adhere to a set of norms far removed from its dominant practices. Victims of violence in recent months demand justice and that, they say, means prosecution in the courts and the imprisonment of the guilty: such views speak of a vivid belief in the possibility of such things.⁶⁵ It is not entirely wishful thinking.

In the aftermath of periods of repression, the police and courts have haphazardly arrested and prosecuted people for political crimes. Such was the case in 2000 and 2002, and once again in the aftermath of the 2008 run-off.⁶⁶ *The Standard* reported on 20 July the case of a Matabeleland magistrate who jailed a war veteran for nine years for stock theft. He admitted taking and killing a cow to feed the partisans of a local ‘base’.⁶⁷ There have been similar reports of arrests for property damage and assaults by Zanu(PF) supporters in Masvingo, Matabeleland and Mashonaland.⁶⁸ The Zimbabwe Peace Project reported a new police initiative in July, called – tellingly – Operation Wanga Watuma Nani? or Who Gave Authority?, in which police in some areas shut down Zanu(PF) bases and arrested militia members and veterans for a variety of crimes from assault to robbery.⁶⁹ Against the odds and with great bravery, lawyers continue to use the law successfully to defend political rights while the dense network of Zimbabwean human rights NGOs documents where and how the law has been broken and stresses the necessity of its enforcement.

The insistence on behaving as rights-bearing citizens is not something that can survive violence forever, however. Appeals to the law through formal state institutions have too often failed. Even after the start of negotiations in July 2008 some state institutions tolerated and abetted the contradictory claims to authority and

62. Fontein, ‘Anticipating the tsunami’.

63. It could be argued that the MDC’s legalism played into Zanu(PF)’s hands. However, the adoption of ‘other means’ – i.e. a politics of violent confrontation – may well have suited Zanu(PF) far better, offering it the opportunity for far more comprehensive repression on the scale of the 1980s. Adopting such strategies may also have had a devastating effect on democratic practice within the MDC.

64. See, e.g., accounts in SPT, *Desperately seeking sanity*, p. 38; SPT, *Destructive engagement*, p. 24; HRW, ‘Bullets for each of you’; ‘MDC – Manicaland update’, <http://www.thezimbabwean.co.uk>, 1 September 2008; Jocelyn Alexander, ‘Punishment and politics in post-2000 Zimbabwe: State craft and political imaginaries’, paper presented to the conference on ‘political economies of displacement in post-2000 Zimbabwe’, Johannesburg, 9-11 June 2008.

65. SPT, *Desperately seeking sanity*, p. 40.

66. Alexander, ‘Punishment and politics’.

67. ‘War veteran jailed for stock theft’, *The Standard*, 20 July 2008.

68. SPT, *Desperately seeking sanity*, p. 24; Pers. Comm., SPT, 18 August 2008.

69. Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP), *Post run-off presidential election report no. 4*, July 2008.

understandings of 'law' and 'crime' held by the veterans and militias who still manned bases in many rural areas. Reports multiplied of Zanu(PF) militias and veterans who beat and extorted goods and labour from internally displaced MDC supporters (real or imagined) who returned to their rural homes after the June elections. Returnees were charged with the crimes of 'selling out', 'seeking refuge', and 'seeking asylum'. Some were told to 'join former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in London or pay a beast so they can be "accepted back" into the community'.⁷⁰ This was both a money-making business and an assertion of authority, rooted in the third chimurenga's violent practice and ideological conviction, that was entirely at odds with a restoration of bureaucracy and law.

Conclusion

The Zimbabwean state has a convincing monopoly on violence but its continued abuse of that monopoly may sow the seeds for its future demise.⁷¹ Violence has created a new political generation. Thousands of militia members have carried out extreme abuses in the name of Zanu(PF), and may not be willing to give up violence as a means of survival if not politics. In Harare, where bases were shut down in July, militias reportedly turned to violent crime; in Manicaland, unpaid militia members allegedly turned to illegal diamond mining in August.⁷² For others, activism in the opposition has broken their belief in the promise of the law and the power of the vote. A significant and growing constituency in the

MDC has argued since the defeat of 2000 that legal appeal and electoral participation could not succeed in the face of Zanu(PF)'s violence and the corruption of state institutions. In her interviews with MDC activists in 2006, LeBas was 'struck by the extent to which the violence of [MDC] party youths was considered legitimate or at least justified as a natural or even necessary response to the violent political system'.⁷³ Where the police and courts offer no redress, human rights groups stress that victims of violence may retaliate outside the law.⁷⁴ Such acts are a rarity so far, but a generation schooled in violence and steeped in the language of sell-outs on the one hand and martyrs on the other is growing up fast, and it is doing so amidst communities that have been deeply divided by the intimate exercise of political violence.

Will a negotiated power-sharing agreement offer the possibility for the revival of institutions capable of delivering justice and protecting rights, as well as delivering Zimbabweans from the kukiya-kiya economy? The signs are not propitious: the Memorandum of Understanding signed on 21 July committed the parties to ending violence and resuming humanitarian aid. Neither occurred in the first weeks of negotiation. In mid-August, at least 12 MDC MPs still faced politically motivated criminal charges. Since the June 27 elections, 32 MDC supporters have been killed - two since the signing of the Memorandum. The official restrictions on humanitarian aid instituted on June 4 were only suspended (and then only partially so) on 29 August, leaving many of Zimbabwe's most vulnerable people without food and medicines.⁷⁵ This was bad faith on Zanu(PF)'s part, and it was underlined when Mugabe took a break from the

70. Caiphaz Chimhete, 'Join Blair in London war veterans tell MDC returnees', *The Standard*, 20 July 2008. Also see ZPP, *Post run-off*; Jonga Kandemiiri, 'Parts of Zimbabwe's Manicaland Province still 'no-go' zone for opposition', VOA, 14 August 2008. Some 55 bases in Manicaland and Mavingo were reported to be operational on 5 August. See 'The list: Operational ZANU-PF militia torture camps', 5 August 2008, <http://www.hararetribune.com/index.php?news=167>.

71. Much on the Kenyan model. See David Anderson, *Violence and politics in Kenya: African democracy in crisis*, Oxford, James Currey, forthcoming.

72. SPT, *Desperately seeking sanity*, p. 38; 'MDC - Manicaland update', respectively.

73. LeBas, 'The politics of collapse', p. 24.

74. SPT, *Desperately seeking sanity*, p. 38. See 'Zanu-PF militia thug punished', 15 August 2008, <http://www.hararetribune.com/index.php?news=298>.

75. On political violence and the humanitarian situation, see HRW, "'They beat me like a dog': Political persecution of opposition activists and supporters in Zimbabwe", New York, August 2008; SPT, *Desperately Seeking Sanity*, pp. 15-16; ZPP, *Post run-off*; Veritas, *Bill Watch Special*, 10 September 2008.

negotiations on Zimbabwe Defence Forces day in order to reward with promotions three key figures in his June election victory – ZEC head George Chiweshe, CIO chief Happyton Bonyongwe, and Paradzai Zimondi, the prison service chief – and to praise the military for the ‘unparalleled patriotism and professionalism in the way they have carried out their constitutional role of defending our nation.’⁷⁶

The rumour-filled reporting on the secretive negotiations seemed to indicate that they were primarily about the horse-trading necessary to accommodate and assuage senior figures on all sides, not the difficult work needed to overcome the legacies of violence, impunity and failed reconciliation. This leaves the negotiations vulnerable. The MDC must convince its members as well as the civic movement which has acted as its ally that it has not given too much away. Civic leaders have loudly proclaimed their objections to the secrecy and exclusiveness of the talks, and to the possibility of perpetrators of political violence being granted amnesties or a continued hold on office. For them, the bullet must not beat the ballot. Mugabe must convince the Zanu(PF) hawks and security force chiefs that he has not given too much away, and thereby left them vulnerable to prosecution, retribution or poverty. They have accrued economic as well as political and coercive power, and they have repeatedly said they will not recognise the authority of Tsvangirai whatever the outcome of elections. Will they do so on the back of negotiations? The bare minimum price is likely to be impunity for human rights abuses and continued control over key security institutions. Such a deal will alienate much of the MDC and many of its civic allies. It will make transforming institutions of governance from the logic of arbitrary and partisan violence to the predictability of bureaucracy and the legitimacy of democracy a formidable task. Anger and wonder are likely to live on.

76. Raymond Maingire, ‘Mugabe showers praise on the military’, *The Zimbabwe Times*, 12 August 2008.