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## **Zimbabwe: Transition to Where?**

### **The African World**

**By Bill Fletcher, Jr.**

**BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor**

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The announcement of the unity government between President Robert Mugabe and opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai brought with it a very cautious sigh of relief. Friends and observers of the Zimbabwe crisis have been uneasy for some years, concerned that the political situation could devolve into a full-fledged civil war. The agreement for a unity cabinet with Tsvangirai serving as prime minister *seemed* to indicate that the country had stepped back from the precipice. "Seemed" is the operative word because the situation remains too unstable to suggest that the crisis is over.

The conflict in Zimbabwe between Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (Popular Front) [ZANU-PF] and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change [MDC] has its roots in the struggle against internationally imposed - and Mugabe adopted - structural adjustment policies that resulted in a greater level of impoverishment of the Zimbabwe workers and farmers. Added to this were the events surrounding the seizures of land held by white farmers and the question that arose as to who should receive the land.

The struggle in Zimbabwe has never been a clean one, i.e., on both sides there are major problems, but what became clear in the 2000s was the commitment of the Mugabe ruling clique to hold onto power irrespective of any challenge. A desire to stay in power might have meant one thing had the Mugabe group been committed to genuine democratic elections, but for much of the 2000s it has been engaged in the on-going harassment of the opposition to the point that it is difficult to believe that there is any sort of dedication to genuine democratic elections.

In the aftermath of Zimbabwe's most recent elections - which it appears that MDC won

but which ZANU will not fully concede - efforts have been underway toward a government of national unity, that is, a government with representatives of both ZANU and the MDC. It has been hoped that this will stabilize the situation. This may happen, but even while Tsvangirai was giving his inaugural address, ZANU-PF aligned authorities were in the process of arresting one of Tsvangirai's aids and Mugabe was attempting to introduce additional pro-ZANU cabinet (junior) personnel.

One does not have to be a supporter of MDC (which I am not) in order to realize that Zimbabwe has been crumbling. It has an inflation rate which defies belief. It has a cholera epidemic that President Mugabe attempted to both downplay and then to blame on outside forces, a suggestion that has gained NO international credibility. Internal political dissent is met with by various forms of repression, including torture (note: and since people I know have been tortured I am not particularly open to the suggestion that the torture allegation is a creature of imperialist propaganda).

So, Zimbabwe has a chance and in this moment it will be important for its friends to lend support. The support should not mean turning a blind eye to any forms of criminal and undemocratic activity, whether driven by internal or external forces. Rather, it means support for the process. Supporting the process means that efforts must be undertaken to gain stability in Zimbabwe. Part of gaining stability will mean a genuine commitment of foreign economic assistance particularly on the part of countries which were, to a very great degree, responsible for the mess that unfolded within Zimbabwe (specifically, Britain and the USA which reneged on financial commitments when Zimbabwe was liberated from white minority rule). But such assistance must be both constructive as well as coincide with genuine efforts by both sides to achieve a functioning government of national unity. South African dockworkers, a few months ago, took a courageous and righteous step in refusing to unload a Chinese ship loaded with weapons headed for Zimbabwe. With all due respect, Zimbabwe needs more small arms - which one could loosely interpret as foreign assistance - as much as it needs more cholera. The South African dockworkers should be applauded. At the same time, and in view of this unity government, while Zimbabwe does not need more arms, it certainly needs economic and healthcare support from foreign governments. The cholera epidemic must be brought under control, but so too must the inflation and massive unemployment.

All too frequently, when it appears that there is a chance for stability and democratic debate, President Mugabe pulls back and begins acting like the main character in the story of the drowning man and the gold. You know the story. A ship sank and a man was treading water, attempting to stay afloat. A rowboat approached him and someone on it stuck out their hand in order to bring the man on board. The drowning man was holding onto some gold and refused to let go of the gold in order to save himself. As a result, he sank beneath the surface...along with his gold.

My hope is that President Mugabe is prepared to take a different approach to the future of Zimbabwe rather than sinking beneath the waves in his obsessive desire to keep his clique and himself in power.

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*BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor, Bill Fletcher, Jr., is a Senior Scholar with the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), the immediate past president of [TransAfrica Forum](#) and co-author of, [Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice](#) (University of California Press), which examines the crisis of organized*

*labor in the USA. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Fletcher.*

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