

What follows a stolen election in Zimbabwe?

Imagine being a Zimbabwean today, wretchedly staring another parliamentary election in the face knowing that his vote will not make the slightest difference to the outcome, and that nothing will change in his miserable life once it is all over.

If he's seen to vote for the opposition he risks being marginalized, starved, physically abused, or even worse, tortured or killed. Robert Mugabe and his ZANU (PF) election machine, with much-practiced precision, has already put in place all the necessary structures to ensure victory—be it a voters' roll filled with dead people, programmed youth militia in uncooperative constituencies, or bags of maize meal in areas where people are starving.

So why should any Zimbabwean fighting such insurmountable odds be foolish enough to go to the polls on March 31st when the results are a foregone conclusion? The only reason, I believe, is because so many are so urgently seeking positive change. This was illustrated recently when MDC supporters gave the party a firm mandate not to boycott what-we-all-know will be a fraudulent election.

Everyone is familiar with the increasingly serious humanitarian crises unfolding in Zimbabwe today, but what people are not aware of is the magnitude of these crises in the average Zimbabwean's life. While the world focuses on the country's political crisis and whether or not observers will be allowed in to monitor the election, and while President Mbeki publicly condemns the Bush administration for calling Zimbabwe an 'outpost of tyranny' in an interview with the Financial Times, Zimbabweans are dying in droves from a collapsing health sector, a collapsed agricultural sector and a bankrupt economy.

I am not sure what President Mbeki's definition of tyranny is, but in my book selective starvation is certainly tyrannical. Banning NGOs and the independent media, while intimidating journalists so badly that they are forced to flee the country without their families or belongings, is also tyrannical. Brutalizing MDC supporters and arresting and detaining women for spreading a message of love on Valentines Day is, in my book, definitely tyrannical.

Robert Mugabe recently gave the war veteran's militia, ex-political prisoners and traditional chiefs a 1 400% pay increase in the hope of buying their support for ZANU (PF)'s election

strategy. In the previous two elections the war veteran's militia led a countrywide reign of terror against the opposition and are considered responsible for most of the murders that took place.

Juxtapose this then against the health and education sectors being told to "pay their own way" after the government adopted a cost-cutting exercise at the end of last year. Only two months ago Harare Central Hospital, the second largest in the country, was on the brink of collapse. The elevators at 1428-bed facility no longer worked, laboratory and dialysis machines were out of order. Sinks and toilets were blocked and babies were being delivered in extremely unhygienic conditions. "There is nothing as bad as failing to go to another floor in time to collect oxygen for a dying patient because the elevators are down," a nurse was quoted as saying. "And it hurts when you finally come back minutes later only to find the patient dead."

Understandably, there is a chronic shortage of doctors and nurses in Zimbabwe, most of whom have fled the climate of fear and collapsing economy. In fact, anyone with an education and a small amount of cash has left the country. The Zimbabwean government officially stated that 3.4 million people were now living in exile. The South African government, on the other hand, said that it is home to three of those 3.4 million people. The numbers don't add up when you consider statistics from other neighboring countries, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. We will never know the exact figure, but clearly Zimbabwe is in crisis because an estimated 70% of productive adults have left.

Zimbabwe's refugees are a serious regional problem, not least because of large numbers of people crossing borders who are infected with HIV Aids. Unbelievably, a recent report in the New York Times said that the deaths in South Africa from the Aids virus rose by a shocking 57% from 1997 to 2003 ... this in a country with a booming economy, a sophisticated health sector and a democratic government. I can't imagine what is happening in Zimbabwe where the disease is not being monitored properly, where hospitals have no drugs, where people can no longer afford a decent meal. When my country finally breaks free of Mugabe's oppressive grip, it is the unmanaged spread of HIV Aids and other killer diseases like TB and malaria, I believe, that will be the biggest crisis it faces.

With the collapse of the agricultural sector, Zimbabweans in the rural and urban areas are becoming increasingly vulnerable to hunger. According to a US-funded report, almost half of Zimbabwe's population now faces imminent food shortages, the biggest emergency in Africa after Ethiopia. When Robert Mugabe told donors to stop foisting food aid on to Zimbabwe last

year because they had bountiful harvests, NGOs and human rights groups accused him of politicizing food supplies. Last week, in a complete volte-face, the Zimbabwean government begrudgingly admitted that 1.5 million were in immediate need of assistance. Rather than ask donor agencies to resume food aid, government officials said staple maize meal rations and cash would be distributed to needy households instead. At the same time it is illegal for any Zimbabwean to transport maize meal, and limits have been imposed on the amount an individual can purchase, reinforcing the state monopoly ... and a perfect guarantee for winning votes.

What will the region and the free world do when Zimbabwe's parliamentary election is neither free nor fair which, with the daily mounting evidence emerging from within the country, we know will be the case? What will happen to the ordinary Zimbabwean struggling to survive in the quick sand of an imploding country? Who will come to his rescue?

Certainly not the United Nations which has just selected Cuba and Zimbabwe to a panel that will decide on the agenda for next month's meeting of its Human Rights Commission. The regimes of two of the world's top human rights-abusers, representatives of Robert Mugabe and Fidel Castro, will now help decide which human-rights complaints will get a hearing at the UN! In August last year the United States filed a complaint to the commission, as the Europeans did the year before. Between them they were unable to even table a resolution against the Mugabe regime's persistent human rights abuses.

The IMF isn't coming to anyone's rescue either. Although it has just postponed a decision to expel Zimbabwe as a member, it also criticized the government for its "insufficient attempts to halt the country's economic decline". That economic decline is not going to be halted any time soon, particularly if Robert Mugabe gives hastily cobbled together pay rises to his security services and private militia in the run-up to an election.

South Africa, the regional superpower, won't rescue the ordinary Zimbabwean either. Admittedly, over the past four years it has become home to many, where press reports regularly highlight the plight of many on the streets of Johannesburg or in the Lindela Repatriation Camp. President Mbeki's government has barely acknowledged there is a humanitarian crisis unfolding in Zimbabwe. Rather, he and his ministers are focused on their 'quiet diplomacy' initiative: the 'quiet diplomacy' that evidently has turned to 'silent diplomacy' after it failed to comment on ZANU (PF)'s continued non-adherence to the SADC protocol on governing elections, which

Robert Mugabe ratified in Mauritius last year. The South African Foreign Affairs Minister, in fact, said that she “was satisfied that Zimbabwe was doing enough to ensure free and fair elections” in a recent press interview, even though SADC observers were still waiting for their promised invitation, Cosatu and the Democratic Alliance had both been kicked out of Zimbabwe, and Robert Mugabe had refused to allow a SADC delegation of lawyers to assess electoral reforms. What finally put a cap on it was Mugabe’s lobbying of neighboring countries this week to declare that he is complying with SADC’s rules for governing elections. A newspaper report confirmed that diplomats in Harare said Mugabe wanted regional leaders “to whitewash the result of the election likely to be won by his party.”

When the MDC loses this parliamentary election, which we know it will—to quote Morgan Tsvangirai in a statement about whether or not to boycott: “We’re damned if we do and we’re damned if don’t”—will ZANU (PF) be sanitized by its friends in the region and a tired and frustrated free world? Will Robert Mugabe, with a majority in Parliament, amend the constitution in order to reinvigorate his own legacy and party faithful? What will the United States and its allies do with a reinvigorated ‘outpost of tyranny’? What will the region do with an exodus of refugees fleeing the reinvigorated ‘outpost of tyranny’?

Robert Mugabe is pushing the southern African region and the AU to join him on his Orwellian joy ride of African-style totalitarianism. It is a dangerous game he is playing, not only for his neighbors but more importantly for his own people. Ordinary Zimbabweans can no longer stand up to this wicked regime alone; they have tried to do so in a nonviolent way and failed. They need the help from the free world. The time has come for the Bush Administration to apply its Jeffersonian dream of exporting liberty and freedom to the courageous ordinary people of this oppressed and helpless nation.

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