Is Zimbabwe on the Cusp

of Mass Protests Over the Country's Worsening Economic Malaise?

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By Tapiwa Chagonda

In recent weeks, Zimbabwe has been on tenterhooks as the leading opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A), and other civic organisational bodies such as the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions have threatened to unleash crippling mass protests that will force the Mnangagwa-led government to revive Zimbabwe's economy, or even remove the current government from power. In anticipation of such demonstrations, Mnangagwa's government has placed the military on high alert and also reportedly purchased over 3 300 AK-47 assault rifles and 600 sniper rifles (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 2019). In addition, over 1 000 police officers have recently undergone rigorous para-military training (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 2009). The arrest of seven civic activists at the end of May on charges of 'subversion of a constitutional government', which is a treasonous offense under Section 22 of Zimbabwe's Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, was clear testimony that the Mnangagwa regime is taking seriously the 'threat' of unseating his government through popular mass protests (Mavhunga, 2019). The threat of looming mass protests, and the recent heavy-handedness with which the current Zimbabwean government handled the last two attempted demonstrations against it, is quite chilling. In August 2018, six people were shot dead by the military after trying to protest against the highly contested July 2018 presidential polls; in January 2019, seventeen people were killed by the security forces while protesting against a sharp fuel hike (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 2019). Why is the Mnangagwa regime caught up in this security storm?

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The Dire straits of Zimbabwe's economy

The biggest nemesis of the Mnangagwa regime has been the economy. The country's continued economic woes have fueled speculations of looming mass protests or the possibly another military operation to remove Mnangagwa from power, barely a few months into his presidency. The regime has so far failed to stem the downward spiral of the Zimbabwean economy since Mnangagwa came into power with the assistance of the military in November 2017. Zimbabwe is in the throes of what has now become a perennial economic quagmire, which is currently marked by sky-rocketing food and fuel prices, incessant power cuts and depleted levels of foreign currency. The current economic crunch has been triggered by the volatility of the new Zimbabwean real time gross settlement (RTGS) dollar, which was introduced in February 2019. When the RTGS dollar was introduced, it was trading at 2.50 RTGS dollars against 1 United States dollar (USD). Three months down the line, 1 USD is now equivalent to 8 RTGS dollars (Kuyedzwa, 2019). The removal of the fuel subsidy by the state in mid-May resulted in massive fuel shortages, with a domino effect on other goods and services. Inflation shot sharply to 75.86% in April from 66.8% in March (Trading Economics, 2019). Political instability, in the form of legitimacy challenges to Mnangagwa's presidency by the MDC-A, has exacerbated Zimbabwe's socio-economic and socio-political problems. As if that is not enough, Zimbabwe has been hit by its worst drought in 40 years during the 2018/2019 rain season, which affected most of the country barring the Mashonaland provinces (*New Zimbabwe*, 2019). In March 2019, cyclone Idai struck and wreaked havoc on people, crops and animals in the eastern parts of Zimbabwe. The drought, coupled with Idai, left over 5.3 million Zimbabweans in need of food aid in 2019 and this includes an unprecedented 37% of the urban population (Thompson, 2019). Thus, the socio-economic and socio-political situation is Zimbabwe is quite perilous at the moment.

Brief background to Zimbabwe's socio-political and socio-economic problems

Zimbabwe's economic crisis is not new – it has been dragging on for slightly over two decades now. Raftopoulos (2003) contends that the Zimbabwean economic malaise was triggered by the compensation and gratuities given to war veterans in 1997. Almost 50 000 of these veterans were given a lump sum of Z$50 000 each and were to be paid a monthly pension of Z$2 000. Initially, the government refused to disburse these funds, but the veterans under the leadership of Chenjerai 'Hitler' Hunzvi were able to force the Zimbabwean government to accede to their demands. Raftopoulos (2003) argues that by capitulating to the demands of the war veterans, the Zimbabwean government was forced into printing greater amounts of money and this then caused the Zimbabwean dollar to collapse against the world's major currencies.

On Friday 14 November 1997, the Zimbabwean dollar crashed, a day that has now come to be known as 'Black Friday'. In 1998, the government joined the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and billions of unbudgeted Zimbabwean dollars were spent there, resulting in further economic decline. The economic crisis was further exacerbated by the farm invasions of 2000, which caused the agricultural sector, which is the backbone of the Zimbabwean economy, to be plunged into chaos. In 2000, the country also held general elections that were widely regarded as unfree and unfair. These elections, together with the farm invasions, led the international community to impose economic sanctions. As a result, foreign direct investment dwindled to a negligible amount.

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The afore-mentioned are the major factors that have caused the Zimbabwean economy to decline into a perilous state. From 2000 to 2008, the national economy contracted by as much as 54% (UNDP, 2008), and it was estimated that the GDP per capita was down to the same level as it had been in 1953. Hyper-inflation was officially reported to have peaked at 231 million percent in July 2008. The Cato Institute, however, argues that hyper-inflation in Zimbabwe peaked at 89.7 sextillion percent in November 2008, which made it the second highest rate of hyper-inflation ever recorded (Hanke, 2009). During the 2000s, there were persistent shortages of foreign exchange, local currency, fuel and food. The International Monetary Fund calculated that the proportion of the population below the poverty datum line was at 80 percent in January 2007.

The political, economic and social crisis that Zimbabwe underwent between 1997 and 2008 has been represented by opposing sides of a deeply polarised political divide as either a 'land crisis' (this mostly by ZANU-PF and old-style nationalists) or a 'governance crisis' (by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and a broad spectrum of civil society groupings). However, as Hammar, Raftopoulos and Jensen (2003) argue, the crisis is not about a single issue, neither is it rooted in a once-off event or single historical trajectory. Rather it emerged from and is sustained by, a dynamic pattern of 'simultaneous, incomplete and competing projects of transformation, legitimation and resistance' that involve a range of differently positioned actors in shifting combinations of alliance and animosity (Hammar et al., 2003). Among the most salient of these projects since independence are those connected to three interweaving analytical and empirical arenas, namely, 'the politics of land and resource distribution; reconstructions of nation and citizenship; and the remaking of state and modes of rule' (Hammar, 2005).

Hammar (2005) further contends that these need to be considered within the context of, among other events, Zimbabwe's long settler-colonial history of embedded inequalities in land and civic rights, which were deeply racialized, gendered and class-based; the nationalist guerrilla struggle during the 1970s; an inherited bureaucracy at independence with strong technocratic, centralising and authoritarian tendencies; the positive expansion of public services and infrastructure during the 1980s and initial economic growth, which was followed by economic decline and the adoption of standard structural adjustment policies in 1991; declining state legitimacy in the 1990s, culminating in both a broad-based constitutional challenge driven by civil society and the formation of the MDC as a formal opposition party in 1999; further challenges to the state and ruling party by war veterans in 1997 and added economic strains caused by Zimbabwe's entrance into the war in the DRC in 1998; and the failure of the land reform initiatives from 2000 onwards. It is therefore evident that the Zimbabwean crisis has festered for a long time and this situation is creating serious challenges for Mnangagwa's regime.

Counter narratives on Zimbabwe's economic crisis

As argued above, the explanations about Zimbabwe's perennial economic crisis are varied and highly contested. The narrative that has been proffered by the ZANU-PF government is that sanctions, which have been imposed on the country by Western nations, are the reason why the Zimbabwean economy is in such dire straits and it will find it difficult to recover unless these are lifted (Chagonda, 2016). The Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act, which was promulgated by the United States government in 2001, is one such piece of legislation that is cited by the Zimbabwean government to explain the dearth of foreign direct investment in the country by countries in the global North. The leading opposition party, the MDC-A, is fingered by the ZANU- PF regime as having played a hand in the imposition of these sanctions.

The long-drawn out economic crisis in Zimbabwe can also be blamed on the speculative tendencies of many business individuals, which can be traced to the hyperinflation of 2008. During this period, many emerging forex barons speculated on the highly volatile and weak Zimbabwean dollar before it was eventually shelved (Chagonda, 2016). This culture of speculation has spread to other critical products and goods that are in short supply, such as fuel, wheat and maize. The Mnangagwa regime has even blamed cartels that are 'determined to sabotage the economy' for hoarding goods that are in short supply, thus causing artificial shortages in the market and then re-selling these same goods at exorbitant prices on the 'black market' (New Zimbabwe, 2019). The Mnangagwa government has promised to rein in the activities of these cartels and 'saboteurs' but, as yet, no decisive action has been taken on these 'phantom figures', leaving one to ponder who these nameless and faceless figures are. What is clear, though, is that the Mnagagwa regime has to fix the Zimbabwean economy, which has proven to be ZANU-PF's Achilles heel for more than two decades now, regardless of the source of the crisis. Otherwise, the current regime will suffer an ignominious exit from power, hence the current panic within Zimbabwe's security sector. ■

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