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REVIEW

Economic Crisis and Prospects of Regime Breakdown in Zimbabwe



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Ruling parties foster elite cohesion, which is widely viewed as essential to authoritarian stability. Elite cohesion may be defined as rulers' ability to maintain the loyalty and cooperation of allies within the regime. Where cohesion is high, ministers, allied legislators, and local officials routinely support and cooperate with the government. Internal rebellion and defection are rare, and when they occur, they attract few followers. Where cohesion is low, incumbents routinely confront insubordination, rebellion, or defection, which often contributes to authoritarian breakdown, (Levitsky and Way, 2010)¹.

¹ Levitsky and Way, (2010) *Competitive Authoritarianism Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Introduction

This paper contends that economic decline alone is not adequate to lead to authoritarian breakdown. It is written in a context of political and economic crisis marked by recent uncoordinated protests by a plethora of disparate forces with disparate interests such as #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka, public sector workers, informal sector and veterans of the liberation struggle whose common denominator is the quest for social change under a competitive authoritarian regime led by ZANU PF.



#Tajamuka protestors in Harare © nehandaradio.com

It assesses the current political and fundamentally the economic contradictions in Zimbabwe and its potential to cause regime breakdown positing that the economic crisis alone cannot adequately explain prospects of regime breakdown. Zimbabwe has faced economic challenges since the introduction of the structural adjustment program in 1991 and critically at the turn of the 21st century when the government started the program of land redistribution. However, despite this chronic economic crisis, the ZANU PF government has defied the winds of change and remained in power despite mounting pressure at home and abroad.

While economic crises have resulted in chaotic regime breakdown in many parts of the world, this paper elucidates why and how President Mugabe's government has survived the kinds of intense domestic crises that toppled

similar authoritarian regimes faced with near economic breakdown. To enable the discussion, the paper employs a political economy analysis approach, defined by Collinson (2003:3) as,

“the interaction of political and economic processes in society: the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time.”²

Elite dis cohesion in both party and state marked by ongoing purges in ZANU PF and the politics of dissent within the party fronted by veterans of the 1970s war of liberation as well as ideological contradictions and raptures among ruling elites in the midst of the ravaging economic crisis could be a new development and dimension worthy analytic investigation to possible contribution to authoritarian breakdown in Zimbabwe.

ZANU PF and the Economic Crisis: Weathering the Storm

An economic crisis according to Wright (2010:5) can disrupt the equilibrium of power in an authoritarian regime in three ways namely; one, the crisis can provide a focal point for opposition protests; two, it can create divisions within the regime on how to respond to the economic crisis and mitigate regression; and three, it can deplete the resources available to the regime to create avenues of patronage or repress potential opponents leading to

² Collinson, S. (Ed.). (2003). Power, Livelihoods And Conflict: Case Studies in Political Economy Analysis For Humanitarian Action. Humanitarian Policy Group. London: Overseas Development Institute.

defections by key institutions that have always supported the regime.³



Empty shops in 2008 at the height of economic meltdown in Zimbabwe © thetelegraph.co.uk

At the turn of the century, Zimbabwe was grappling with deep political and economic crises which were, amongst other things, a result of the failed structural adjustment programmes implemented in 1990, corruption, attempts to impose a one party-state, involvement in regional war in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1998, democratic deficits and rising poverty among the working class, student and workers' strikes and civil society organisations calling for constitutional reforms (Saunders, 2000; Hammar & Raftopoulos, 2003)⁴. Since then, Zimbabwe has been engulfed in a chronic economic crisis, though it showed signs of abating during the period of the inclusive government between 2009 and 2013.

Mustapha and Whitefield, (2009: 216) observed that in Zimbabwe the ruling (ZANU-PF) party initially had the legitimacy of being a liberation movement and the rightful ruler who represented the liberated black majority of the population. At independence in 1980, ZANU PF

arguably inherited an effective state apparatus and professional civil service and retained its legitimacy through the effective delivery of social services, such as a democratised and accessible education and health delivery systems. However, Mustapha and Whitefield (2009: 216) submitted that by the late 1990s and then more rapidly after 2000:

.....the logic of the Zimbabwean state was rapidly transformed. With a worsening economic crisis and the strictures of structural adjustment, the state became partisan as it strove to maintain control. Support for the party increasingly trumped merit as the basis of civil service recruitment⁵.

Alexander, (2009: 189) seems to agree with this explanation, suggesting that the ZANU PF's strategies of the mid 1990s left it politically vulnerable.

Structural adjustment, a stalled land reform programme, declining state capacity and accountability, and elite corruption combined to undermine the political capital derived from the delivery of development and the nationalist mantle⁶,

Alexander, (ibid.) highlighted some of the factors that facilitated the decline of the state and the ruling party's

³ Wright, J. (2010) Exit During Crisis: How Openness, Migration, And Economic Crisis Affect Democratization, UCLA.

⁴ Hammar, A. and Raftopoulos, B., (2003) Zimbabwe's Unfinished Business: Rethinking Land, State and Nation in Zimbabwe's Unfinished Business, Rethinking Land, State and Nation in the Context of Crisis, Harare, Weaver Press.

⁵ Mustapha, A. and Whitefield, L. (eds), (2009) Turning Point in African Democracy, Woodbridge, James Currey

⁶ Alexander, J. (2009) 'Zimbabwe Since 1997, Land and the language of war' in Mustapha, A., & Whitefield, L. (eds), (2009) *Point in Turning African Democracy*, Woodbridge: James Currey.

political power under President Mugabe's stewardship. Such scholarly insights are shared by Hammar and Raftopoulos (2003: 4), who posit that: "Zimbabwe's deepening economic and political crisis was well under way long before the dramatic events triggered by the constitutional referendum in February 2000."

Alexander (2009:185) submits that the combination of a new and vibrant political opposition, Zanu PF's defeat in the constitutional referendum, the violent farm invasions of the largely white-owned farms, and the holding of deeply flawed and disputed elections, changed the political situation in Zimbabwe in 2000. She argued that the upheavals were rooted in both complex legacies of the nationalist struggle and the socio-economic pressures of the 1990s, but suggests that two specific events reshaped the possibilities for Zimbabwe politics in 1997⁷ precipitating what critical voices have termed the 'crisis' of 2000, and what the government has termed the 'third chimurenga' or uprising, of descendants of those previously disadvantaged by colonialism after 1890.

The first of these was the ZANU PF government's decision to accede to the demands of material compensation made by the war veterans of the 1970s liberation war. The second was the designation of over 1 400 mostly white-owned commercial farms for compulsory acquisition by the state, (ibid.),

The ZANU PF government has clung to power and has allegedly become more authoritarian during the protracted economic crisis. This is despite the economic crisis providing a

focal point for regime opposition and creating division within the ruling elite over economic policy and responses from government.

That ZANU PF appears to be impervious to economic crisis while other regimes collapse and democratize when faced with a crisis could largely be explained by elite cohesion in party and state as well the veterans of the liberation struggle. More so, there were insignificant ideological contradictions in the ruling elite. At this moment, the status quo is faced with serious contradictions in its rank and file at a period when the economy is underperforming.

The Economic Crisis and Response from Citizens

Wright (2010:7) asserts that when a country is faced with an economic crisis, its citizens are faced with three options namely, to revolt, not to revolt or to exit.⁸ In the first option, we argue that the allure of exit options presented to citizens during times of economic crisis conditions has a bearing on the relationship between economic crisis and democratization.



Zimbabwe illegally crossing into South Africa through the crocodile infested Limpopo River © nehandaradio.com

Citizens with more attractive exit options during an economic crisis are more likely to migrate instead of pressing the government for democratic reforms leading to

⁷ Ibid, p185

⁸ Ibid, p 7

authoritarian breakdown. It is estimated that there are more than 5 million Zimbabweans in the diaspora with South Africa alone having more than 3 million. Europe and the United States that accounted for Zimbabweans leaving the country at the height of the crisis have now put stringent immigration policies.

In the case of the European Union (EU), the rise of right wing parties, the inflow of refugees from war zones in the Middle East and the economic recession means that the prospects of Zimbabweans being accepted have been limited in recent years. The EU in particular has of late shifted its foreign policy in favor of engaging the Harare administration. In the past the migration of Zimbabweans into the diaspora beginning in 2000 has had serious ramifications on the broader democratic processes in particular due to the fact that these citizens cannot vote.

However, due to the fact that the exit route is no longer viable, citizens have now adopted the revolt route in confronting the government to address issues of unemployment and general stifling of civil and political liberties. The emergence, of citizens led protest organisations such as *#Tajamuka* and *#ThisFlag* is confirmation to the above notion. Exit routes are no longer viable and attractive as before as they are fraught with many challenges.

In South Africa for example where most Zimbabweans have migrated to, xenophobic attacks on foreigners and stringent employment requirements doused the exit route. This has also seen informal sector players that are largely linked to the ZANU PF patronage network taking to the streets protesting against government policies

that ban imports; the bedrock of their survival.

Economic Crisis as a Trigger of Regime Breakdown

An economic crisis is regarded as a key trigger in of democratic transition in that, the economic crisis breaks down the ruling coalition of an authoritarian regime by increasing fissures within the ruling elite and it undermines the legitimacy of the regime as the regime largely relies on economic performance for public support.



Zimbabwe dollar before the introduction of multi-currencies ©
www.financialgazette.co.zw

More so, when the economy is in crisis, patronage networks are weakened. The fate of authoritarian regimes such as ZANU PF during economic crisis depends on three variables namely; one, the role of the private sector and business groups; two, the role of the middle class; and, three, more importantly the role of the military and political elites who control the coercive apparatus of the state. These groups are weakened in the current crisis where the economy has been in recession for the past 15 years.

The Current Economic Crisis and Prospects for Regime Breakdown

The current economic recession is situated in the context of a dual (political and economic) transition in that political power once enjoyed by the regime is waning and the economy has experienced seismic shifts characterized by the surging informal sector. Thus political and economic challenges are coalescing around the regime at the same time.



Queues at banks due to the liquidity crisis © insiderzim.com

Moreover, as advanced in our earlier papers, elite dis cohesion in ZANU PF especially at the political level seems to be fermenting on a daily basis mainly around the contentious issue of succession where senior party members have been expelled without the due process of both the party and country's legal processes. In this regard, the elite disintegration in the war veterans' institution and other wings of ZANU PF such as the youth and women's league are important.



War Veterans were the driving force behind the farm invasions in 2000. ©nehandaradio.com

ZANU PF has maintained its vice like grip on power amid different episodes of economic crisis owing to the loyalty of coercive apparatus of the state and in particular, shock troopers such as the war veterans. The loyalty of the security apparatus of the state to the politico-military nexus, strategic segments of the state and individuals in the control of the party machinery has ensured sustained hold on power through their legal and extra-legal activities on the political terrain during election times. The ubiquitous role of the retired war veterans and those serving in the security apparatus of the state in the army, intelligence and police service on the political and electoral affairs of Zimbabwe meant that ZANU PF maintained its hegemony.

However, in recent weeks, there appears to be clear disruption of the umbilical cord of the war veterans and the political leadership of ZANU PF especially elements aligned to the President Mugabe who do not have liberation war credentials as it relates to succession power struggles. The war veterans communiqué of 21 July 2016, stated

*....in view of the above, we the veterans of Zimbabwe's war of liberation, together with our toiling masses, hereby declare that henceforth, in any forthcoming elections, will not support such a leader who has presided over untold suffering of 'the general population for his own personal aggrandizement and that of his cronies.'*⁹

⁹ On the 21st of July 2016, War Veterans issued scathing attack on Mugabe's leadership in a communiqué titled "War veterans' Communiqué on the state of Zimbabwe's economy, the Zanu PF leadership and the way forward." The full communiqué can be

It is thus evident that the current economic environment has caused fissures between the regime and this critical sector and could be a Waterloo for the regime in the sense that the war veterans are challenging the Mugabe on ideological, legal and economic performance of his rule.



War Veterans following proceedings during a meeting on 21 July 2016, which authored a communiqué severing ties with President Mugabe © voazimbabwe.com

Furthermore, as ZANU PF is now riddled with factions that are cutting across the security sector and other institutions of government, this phenomenon has destabilized the military ensuring that conflict between them has become intense.



War Veterans flee from police water canon after their meeting was called off by police on 18 February 2016. © newzimbabwe.com

What is also interesting is that whereas in the past the military were always quick to come to the defense of Mugabe when he faced both internal and external

challenges, so far, they have not publicly defended Mugabe's crackdown against war veterans. It is important to note that the security leadership of the state in the army, police service, prison service and the secret agents are veterans of the liberation struggle. Mugabe is therefore setting comrades against comrades and this puts the security sector especially the army in a very compromising position

Literature on transitions from military rule usually begins with splits within the ruling military elite. Although Zimbabwe is led by a civilian leadership, the history of Zimbabwe shows that the military in Zimbabwe has been a huge if not a decisive factor in the political and electoral affairs of the state. The fact that the government is failing to consistently remunerate on time public sector workers and the security sector provides another litmus test to the relationship between the security sector and the regime in a situation where the war veterans are largely speaking the language of the opposition and popularizing the politics of dissent against President Mugabe and his administration.

In regimes such as Zimbabwe with nuances of personalistic and militaristic rule, susceptibility to breakdowns is high when they fail to remunerate their gatekeepers in the form of the military. Therefore, the attendant economic crisis coupled with lack of elite cohesion in both party and state and the physical and mental mortality of President Mugabe at 92 years that has stirred fierce succession battles contributes to authoritarian erosion and possible authoritarian breakdown. The lack of elite coercion especially in the security apparatus could be quite significant if not the decisive power bloc in authoritarian breakdown in Zimbabwe.

This is a persuasive argument given the fact that the coercive and not the consensual apparatus of hegemony have

obtained on <https://www.theindependent.co.zw/2016/07/22/war-veterans-communique-state-zimbabwes-economy-zanu-pf-leadership-way-forward/>

been decisive in marinating ZANU PF's hold on power in particular during the 2000 parliamentary election, 2002 disputed presidential poll and the 2008 June presidential run-off where the military was deployed to publicly campaign for Mugabe and ZANU PF.

The Democratic Contingent Harnessing the Economic Crisis

As argued, the economic crisis is significant but on its own, it is not enough to cause but trigger authoritarian breakdown. Factors such as the role of the democratic contingent are critical in ensuring regime breakdown. Stepan (1990) argued that the dynamics of authoritarian regimes and the prospects for regime change also depend on the relationship between the regime and democratic opposition. He argued that we can understand regime dynamics on the basis of the interactions among the core regime supporters, the coercive apparatus, passive supporters, passive opponents, and active opponents.

Stepan outlined five critical tasks for the opposition in roughly ascending order of complexity: "(1) *resisting integration into the regime* – integration into the regime through governments of national unity, such as in Zimbabwe between 2009 and 2013, may not result in regime breakdown but rather provides the regime with breathing space and windows of opportunity to equalize and neutralize the opposition.

(2) *guarding zones of autonomy against it* – this entails the consolidations of incremental gains that would have been made in resisting or aiding regime breakdown such as consolidating pockets of support such as councils, urban areas and civil society. (3) *disputing its legitimacy* –

dispute the regime's inability to uphold the constitution, human rights and the rule of law.

(4) *raising the costs of authoritarian rule* – through challenging acts of the regime that are detrimental to the transition and other democratic processes such as the recent wave of public protests against corruption and under performance of the economy; and (5) *creating a credible democratic alternative* – the opposition must desist from mimicking the political decay of the regime but must position itself as a government in waiting.

In the context of Zimbabwe, the democratic contingent should consider embracing "softliners" within the regime and defectors. These individuals who were erstwhile pillars of support for the regime could be decisive in aiding the democratic contingent due to their experience and networks.

Economic conditions provide interregnums in which the regime strength is weak. It is essential for the democratic contingent to maximize the window when revolutionary threat is binding. There exist periods of time during which citizens have the capacity to overcome collective action costs and credibly threaten the authoritarian regime with revolution. These windows are not permanent and at other times, however, this threat is not credible. Also, during periods when the revolutionary threat is binding, the authoritarian regime cannot credibly promise to redistribute resources to quell the threat. Furthermore, the democratic contingent should create convergence of forces around the failing economy.