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# ZIMBABWE

# POLITICAL ECONOMY

# REVIEW

OPPOSITION COHESION: THE MISSING LINK IN AUTHORITARIAN  
BREAKDOWN IN ZIMBABWE

## **OPPOSITION COHESION: MISSING LINK IN AUTHORITARIAN BREAKDOWN IN ZIMBABWE**

This paper is part of a series of the Zimbabwe Democracy Institute's analysis of authoritarian erosion and opportunities and possibilities for regime breakdown in Zimbabwe. Previously, ZDI has argued that elite dis-cohesion in Zanu PF, coupled with dis-cohesion in the security apparatus of the state and economic crisis are ingredients for regime breakdown. This paper posits that coupled with elite dis-cohesion and economic regression, opposition cohesion is also of paramount importance in authoritarian erosion and possible regime breakdown.



Representatives of opposition political parties (from left) Dare president, Gilbert Dzikuti, PDParty president, Tendai Biti, MKD leader, Simba Makoni, MDC-T VP, Elias Mudzuri and RDZ president, Elton Mangoma at a Press conference in Harare © NewsDay

The publication examines the politics of opposition party coalitions in Zimbabwe identifying fault lines that have militated against opposition coalitions. Given the political context of an electoral authoritarian regime in Zimbabwe, this paper goes further to identify measures that would help to improve the endurance, success and democratic quality of opposition coalition in Zimbabwe. This paper is informed by two factors. Firstly, the recent nascent attempts by opposition parties towards forging an electoral

coalition ahead of the 2018 general election under the auspices of the National Electoral Reform Agenda (NERA) and the Coalition of Democrats (CODE). Secondly, it is influenced by the current state of fragmentation among opposition forces and the democratic contingent in general.

### **Motivations for Opposition Cohesion**

At present in Zimbabwe, attempts to have opposition cohesion have been mainly motivated by prevailing conditions for regime breakdown and authoritarian erosion. These conditions are elite dis-cohesion within Zanu PF mainly on the issue of succession and the economic spiral downward trend resulting in increasing levels of poverty.

As argued in previous ZDI papers, the current economic crisis undermines support for the regime, divides the ruling elites, and creates opportunities for the opposition to mobilize. The economic crisis helps to lean the balance of power in favour of the opposition and weaken the bargaining power of the incumbent. The economic regression coupled with elite dis-cohesion in Zanu PF particularly in the security sector, manifest in the disenchantment within critical structures such as the war veterans are critical in explaining authoritarian breakdown in Zimbabwe.

These conditions alone are however not enough to lead to authoritarian breakdown but need to be buttressed by opposition cohesion. Elite dis-cohesion in Zanu PF, economic regression and opposition cohesion through coalitions are critical determinants in possible authoritarian breakdown after 36 years of competitive authoritarian rule.



Morgan Tsvangirai walks hand-in-hand with Joice Mujuru during a demonstration in Gweru  
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### Understanding Political Coalitions

Kadima (2006:10) submits that a party coalition is

*“the coming together of a minimum of two political parties for a certain period, in pursuit of an agreed set of common goals to be reached by means of a common strategy, joint actions, the pooling of resources and the distribution of possible subsequent pay-offs”.*

The National Democratic Institute defines a coalition as

*“a temporary union between two or more groups, especially political parties, for the purpose of gaining more influence or power than the individual groups or parties can hope to achieve on their own. By focusing on their common objectives and goals, all of the member groups can build their strength and get an advantage on issues of common interest. With a particular objective in mind –winning an election, passing a particular piece of legislation, or forming a government – coalitions have a limited life span until the objectives are achieved.”*

Browne (1982b:2) postulates that a coalition is;

*“a set of parliamentary political parties that: a) Agree to pursue a common goal or a common set of goals; b) Pool their resources in pursuit of this goals; c) Communicate and form binding commitments concerning their goals; and d) agree on the distribution of the payoffs to be received on obtaining their goal.”*

From the above definitions, there are pull and push factors motivating opposition parties to form alliances with the central strategic objective being the need to win power. Opposition parties have formed coalitions to increase their electoral competitiveness by making every vote count; advocate for democratic reforms; improve their influence in policy formulation and use their limited resources more effectively. They also pull their intellectual capacity together to help understand the political and electoral system as well as the intricacies and intrigues on how the complex nature of the state is organized.

### Post-Independence Opposition Cohesion

Nkiwane, (1998) forwards that first attempts towards opposition cohesion in post-independent Zimbabwe dates back to 1992 with the formation of the United Front which brought together the Zimbabwe Unity Movement, the United African National Council led by Abel Muzorewa, the Zimbabwe African National Union (Ndonga) led by Ndabaningi Sithole and the Conservative Alliance of Zimbabwe led by Ian Smith. However, the alliance could not hold due to the vast diversity of the parties. A second



attempt towards a coalition was between UANC and ZUM where Tekere and Muzorewa were co-presidents but the coalition ended prematurely after the former pulled out. In 2008, there were endeavors to forge a coalition between the two MDCs.

However, the coalition could not be consummated owing to disagreements over the distribution of seats between the parties particularly in the urban areas. In 2013, the MDC-T and Mavambo led by Simba Makoni also formed a coalition. Nonetheless, the coalition was burdened by lack of support from grassroots structures resulting in the coalition fielding two parliamentary candidates in Makoni Central.

### Opposition Fragmentation in Zimbabwe

Nkiwane (1998) states that opposition parties have existed in Zimbabwe since the attainment of independence in 1980. However, it is only from 1989 after the signing of the Unity Accord between Zanu and Zapu that a new set of political parties emerged to challenge the *de jure* one party state. This saw the emergence of parties such as the Zimbabwe Unity Movement in 1989 led by a former Zanu Secretary General, Edgar Tekere.

In 1990, factions emerged in ZUM leading to the formation of the Democratic Party led by Emmanuel Magoche. Also in 1993, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Enock Dumbutshena launched the Forum Party for Zimbabwe. However, it is critical to note that these parties suffered serious challenges relating to fragmentation, poor funding and limited geographical representation as they were urban-centric. These similar challenges continue to albatross the

current opposition. It is also argued that the overwhelming hand of the conflated state under Zanu PF coupled with infiltration by state security agents assisted to destroy attempts to coalesce among regime opponents.



MDC President Welshman Ncube, Sekai Holland, Tendai Biti and Moses Mzila Ndlovu at a coalition ceremony © bulawayo24.com

Mathisen and Svasand [2002:2] assert that opposition parties in African states are highly fragmented and thus many African countries are characterised by many small and weak political parties. The fragmented party system has in many instances strengthened the power of the incumbents. Rakner and Svasand [2002:6] distinguish political party fragmentation into four types: (a) Formal fragmentation: that is when a large number of parties are registered. (b) Competitive fragmentation: fragmentation emerging “*when more parties are able to nominate candidates in a number of constituencies.*” (c) Electoral fragmentation: which “*occurs when votes are spread more evenly across a large number of parties?*” (d) Parliamentary fragmentation: appearing “*when parliamentary seats are more evenly distributed across a large number of parties.*” From the above distinctions, it is clear that Zimbabwe is current caught in competitive fragmentation where there are over twenty opposition political parties.

However, the number of political parties is not indicative of the quality of democracy and could actually be a drawback to democratisation. In this regard, Gentili [2005:11] states *“the numbers of parties that appeared with the opening to democratization is not a demonstration of increased participation, but rather of fragmentation and therefore weakness of the party systems.”* Howard and Roessler (2006) argue that as this fragmentation is beneficial, ruling parties consciously employ a *“divide-and-rule”* tactic to fragment and weaken the opposition parties.

Barring other elections irregularities, opposition parties have also not been successful in ousting the incumbents in elections due to competitive fragmentation and their failure to form solid opposition coalitions. For example in 2008, Morgan Tsvangirai polled 47.9%, Robert Mugabe 43.2% and Simba Makoni 8.3% mathematically meaning had the opposition considered a single presidential candidate, he would have polled more than the required 50%+1 to avoid a re-run.

Although some would argue that Zanu PF would still have devised means to frustrate the opposition, it is imperative to note that the campaigning for Simba Makoni in Matebeleland region was done by the Movement for Democratic Change then led by Professor Arthur Mutambara after the collapse of electoral alliance talks between the two MDCs.

Hence as Zimbabwe treads towards the 2018 general election, it is unavoidable that there is need for solid and genuine opposition cohesion. Ghandi and Reuter (2008) note that authoritarian incumbents usually want the opposition divided since they consider

the formation of coalitions as a threat. Therefore, incumbent regimes implicitly or explicitly prohibit certain type of opposition coalitions. Accordingly there will be need for the opposition to issue joint statement, create joint electoral lists and more importantly forward a single presidential candidate in 2018.

### **Fragmentation as a Lack of Trust**

The competitive fragmentation that has become synonymous with opposition parties in Zimbabwe has to be understood in the context of how the parties emerge. Most opposition parties, if not all, emerge as a result of factionalism, lack of trust and elite dis cohesion within the opposition. This has been a recurring phenomenon in post independence opposition in Zimbabwe.



Morgan Tsvangirai, Welshman Ncube, Tendai Biti and Elton Mangoma © nehandaradio.com

For instance, the MDC led by Morgan Tsvangirai acrimoniously split in October 2005 resulting in the emergence of MDC led by Welshman Ncube. The MDC further split in 2014 resulting in the emergence of the Peoples Democratic Party led by Tendai Biti. The party further split leading to the formation of Renewal Democrats of Zimbabwe led by Elton Mangoma. On the other hand, Zimbabwe People First led by Joice Mujuru is as a result of expulsions from Zanu PF.

These struggles within the struggle have bred a culture of lack of trust in the opposition body politic thereby

obfuscating efforts towards opposition cohesion, as no party trusts the other with the reigns of the state also given the context of strong presidentialism in Zimbabwe.

In the current context, also at the heart of lack of trust is the historical baggage associated with opposition parties such as Zimbabwe People First. Emerging from Zanu PF officials mainly expelled during the 2014 congress, joining forces with such elements of the nationalist guard and with complicated and distrustful past may be deemed oxymoronic and sacrificing ideals, as Zanu PF has been at the center of allegations of human rights abuses, political violence, economic mismanagement and other heinous acts against the people of Zimbabwe.

Some of the officials associated with ZimPF allegedly committed callous crimes such as rape, for instance, the revelations that Agrippa Mutambara raped Judith Todd and the involvement of Didymus Mutasa in the abduction of Jestina Mukoko casts aspersions towards forging coalitions with such elements.

Thus coalitions in settings with a history of political schism or conflict, other party members may see cross-party collaboration as a sign of weakness or a negation or betrayal of fundamental party beliefs. Oyugi's (2006) assertion is that coalitions are mainly formed for purposes of seeking power, thus leading such coalitions to be referred to as 'opportunistic' or 'unprincipled'

### **Personalistic Opposition Parties**

Further to a culture of lack of trust, another factor weighing against opposition cohesion in Zimbabwe relates to the structural set-up and

deficiencies of personalization intrinsic within opposition parties.

Ake [1996:11] submits that,

*"The democratization of Africa has focused on the power elite, who are the natural enemies of democracy.....their involvement in democracy movements is mainly a tactical maneuver. It is a response to internal contradictions and power struggles within a group for whom democracy is essentially a means to power."*

Decalo [1998:29], forwards that the effect of a multiparty system in Africa is the opening of

*"Political floodgates, swamping countries with scores of political parties, mostly narrow ethnic and personal power-machines and thousands of power aspirants."*  
*"Personalistic" opposition parties, which usually rely on "the charismatic appeal of single individual" lack structures extending beyond the national executive, and decision making is highly centralized."*

These kind of parties face split whenever the founder or the leader of the party is challenged resulting in the presence of many fragmented political parties. Given this background of personalization a leader who is not accorded what they may deem a strategic and lucrative position may muddle attempts towards any form of coalition.

### **Lack of Ideological Gravitas**

As opposition parties are constructed along personalities, there is a privation of ideological gravitas. As a government in waiting, the role of the

opposition is to provide policy alternatives particularly in the Zimbabwean context where government policies have been detrimental to socioeconomic development. Opposition should not oppose for the sake of opposing but must be rooted in clear ideological and policy alternatives that seek to provide answers to the existing societal challenges. This should also be the basis upon which opposition cohesion is founded rather than the need to seek political office.

Tucker (2006) argues that yet most pre-electoral bargains among opposition parties usually pertain to the distribution of political offices rather than policy compromises. The focus on office rather than policy may be due to the fact that under dictatorships, the main division within society is the anti- versus pro-regime one rather than other standard ideological or policy cleavages.

### **Potentials for Opposition Cohesion in Zimbabwe**

Given the general weakness of opposition parties in Zimbabwe, the common consensus that no single opposition party could struggle and win an election alone given Zanu PF's monolithic nature owing to party-state conflation, and more importantly, given the competitive authoritarian nature of the state, how can opposition cohesion be attained and in what kind of circumstances will opposition forces be more likely to prevail? There are internal and external issues the coalition will need to address to ensure it prevails.

First and foremost is agreeing on a sound and concrete coalition itself to increase the electoral competitiveness of opposition. There is thus urgent need for the opposition to close ranks,

address issues of mistrust and enunciate an alternative policy programme. However, getting to yes may not be that difficult but sustaining the coalition may prove insurmountable given the diversity and contradictions of the parties and individuals.

There ought to be deliberate efforts to balance self-interest with the broader objective. The success of the coalition and long-term relationship between the parties is thus of concern. Parties should not look at cooperation as a one-off collaboration to be exploited for their own advantage notwithstanding what happens to the other parties. Rather, the coalition should be understood as a process from which all parties should emerge fairly content, thus enhancing their relationship.

Opposition cohesion should be predicated on broad ideological and policy alternatives as congregation points. The coalition must transcend beyond an electoral pact seeking office and power to a coalition with answers that resonate with the people. The coalition should have policy alternatives and ideological congruency. This addresses the negative notion that coalitions are mainly built around opportunism and lack of principle.

To be technical and intellectually competent is very critical because Zimbabwe is a competitive authoritarian regime. As put forward by Levitsky and Way (2010) competitive authoritarian regimes are understood as,

*“civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which fraud, civil*

*liberties violations, and abuse of state and media resources so skew the playing field that the regime cannot be labeled democratic. Such regimes are competitive, in that democratic institutions are not merely a façade: opposition parties use them to seriously contest for power; but they are authoritarian in that opposition forces are handicapped by a highly uneven—and sometimes dangerous—playing field. Competition is thus real but unfair.*

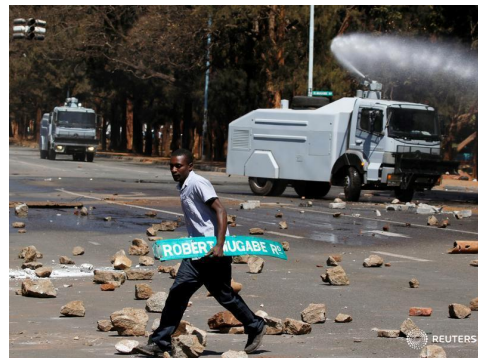
Howard and Roessler (2006) affirm that in a competitive authoritarian regime the more divided the opposition parties, the more susceptible they are to governmental manipulation, cooptation, and repression.

Diamond (2002:24) further asserts that an active and diverse civil society alone, though imperative for the consolidation of democracy as it checks the accountability and power of the government, proves inadequate when matched against an oppressive incumbent or ruling party seeking to guarantee re-election. Instead, opposition victory in a competitive authoritarian regime “requires a level of opposition mobilization, unity, skill, and heroism far beyond what would normally be required for victory in a democracy.”

Levitsky and Way (2001) succinctly state that, what is important in competitive authoritarian regimes is how opposition leaders and civil society groups organize themselves in the electoral periods and their ability to create strategic coalitions that are durable in the face of government repressive force and electoral fraud.

In addition to creating a broad and sound coalition grounded on policy alternatives and ideology, the opposition should design a concrete agenda and programme of action. Programming should be focused on creating the necessary conditions for a credible, free and fair election before the decision on who will be the candidates for the coalition.

Areas of focus should be voter mobilisation, voter registration, obtaining a new and clean voters roll, demilitarizing the election and the electoral management body, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, demystifying the issue of fear particularly among rural voters and massive registration drive for young and new voters.



National Electoral Reform Agenda demonstration © zimetro.com

More importantly creating positive unity among Zimbabweans premised on the need to address the current socioeconomic challenges. Additionally, the more enthused and mobilized the electorate, the more likely people are to vote in the elections, whereas a dispirited, parochial and apathetic citizenry will probably not bother participating in the electoral process. This coalition should be a mobilization point to redeem the Zimbabwean spirit which is currently broken if at all existent.



There are currently over three million Zimbabweans in the diaspora. This is a rich constituency with technically competent personnel. It is critical for the opposition to create frameworks that tap into this essential constituency. The diaspora can also be critical in providing the much needed financial resources.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has forwarded that though economic decline and elite dis cohesion in the ruling party are essential in explaining authoritarian breakdown, opposition cohesion is equally paramount. However, the opposition in Zimbabwe is afflicted with many factors that need to be addressed to ensure concrete and sound coalition.

Challenges such as historical legacies, the personalistic nature of opposition parties, lack of ideological gravitas and lack of trust among leaders militate against cohesion. In this regard, it is fundamental for the opposition to focus more points of convergence rather than divergence. Cohesion should be sought on the basis of ideological superiority, a robust programme of action focusing on mobilization with clearly enunciated policies and programmes of action, creating avenues for strategic inter-linkaging with the diaspora.

Coalition should be sought not as a one-moment transaction but a sustainable course of action for the grater good of Zimbabwe.

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