

The MDC, Neoliberalism and the challenges of post-colonial change.

Brian Raftopoulos, Director of Research and Advocacy, Solidarity Peace Trust and Research Fellow, University of the Western Cape.

Introduction.

From its inception the MDC was characterised by a commitment to liberal political and economic values. Formed in the aftermath of the fall of 'existing socialist' states in Eastern Europe in 1989/90, the MDC was part of the 'second wave' of democratic struggles that broke out in African post colonial states in the 1990's against authoritarian regimes. Developed out of the struggles for constitutionalism, labour rights and democratisation, the language of the MDC eagerly sought to differentiate itself from the exclusive and authoritarian assertions of Zanu PF's nationalism.

The Politics of the MDC.

Born out of a broad array of civic struggles a central part of the MDC was its location in civil society and its fight for a politics of human and civic rights, and a broad, racial and ethnic inclusiveness. Confronted with the violent and selective nationalism of the ruling party that continuously excluded different sections of the populations from 'belonging' to the nation, the MDC projected itself as a party of tolerance, peaceful constitutional struggles and broad democratic values. In bringing together a broad alliance of forces to confront the Mugabe, including support from the Western countries, the liberal social democratic message of the MDC was quickly cast as a foreign creation of 'imperialism' and the party labeled 'puppets' of the West. In the words of one of the early characterizations of the MDC by a Zanu PF mouth-piece:

The MDC has teamed up with ex-Rhodesians, local racist whites and western governments to try to reverse the gains and return Zimbabwe into colonial bondage. These sellouts in MDC would like to ensure that land and all other economic resources remain in the hands of the white minority. Their sole aim is to prevent blacks from reaping the economic rewards of their hard won independence.¹

This racialised language of "sellouts" and "stooges", widely disseminated through the state controlled media, poisoned the political environment in the country, and led to a politics of

¹ Editorial, "MDC white party with black face", Zimbabwe News, Vol 31, No 3, Marc 2000, p2.

intolerance and repression that threatened the liberal pluralist project of the MDC. Even as the MDC and the civic movement demanded the opening of political and civic spaces, greater media freedom, judicial independence and the rule of law, and a broad project for the opening up of the public sphere, Zanu PF was determined to close down such spaces and to demean the politics of tolerance as an outside creation.

Moreover the opposition in Zimbabwe found little solace amongst states in SADC and the AU, as Mugabe's message of 'colonial redress' and 'anti-imperialism' found a resonance on the continent, for a long time relegating the human rights abuses of the Mugabe regime to the margins. Thus the Zimbabwean political and civic opposition had to confront the powerful discourse of colonial redress on the continent, with a language of human rights that was quickly associated with Western strategic interests and disarticulated from the indigenous roots of these struggles. This was an enormous challenge for the democratic forces in Zimbabwe, and it took many years of lobbying, electoral gains, political struggles on the ground, and pressure from the West, for the massive abuses of the Mugabe regime to begin to register amongst African states. However this issue remains one of the central obstacles to post-colonial change.

The GPA, the Donors and the next round of Neo-Liberalism.

In the sphere of economic policy the language of neo-liberalism has been strongly present in the MDC. Confronted with a post-colonial state that has greatly abused its powers to deal with its loss of political legitimacy, through a politics of economic redress that was characterized more by patronage than effective popular participation, the MDC projected the language of 'macro-economic stabilisation', an accountable state with state actors that, in Arthur Mutambara's liberal formulation, "see themselves as enablers of business and not gatekeepers that control and hamper it", and a strong role for the market and international financial involvement. From its early **Restart** programme to the 2009 **Short Term Emergency Recovery Programme (STERP)**, the MDC has sought a return to some form of neo-liberal economic programme, with a formal commitment to welfarist provision.

Notwithstanding Mugabe's vitriolic 'anti-imperialist' rhetoric and all the sloganeering around the need for state sovereignty, Zimbabwe is now less sovereign and more vulnerable to international finance than it has ever been. Thus as the fragile Global Political Agreement staggers towards some kind of stability, all parties to the agreement share one message in common, the need for international assistance, even if they differ on the modality for this engagement. While Mugabe pleads for a normalisation of international assistance the new Prime Minister, Morgan Tsvangirai makes similar appeals. Echoing the demand of STERP that, "all forms of measures and sanctions against Zimbabwe be lifted in order to facilitate a

sustainable solution to the challenges that are currently facing the country”,² Tsvangirai’s message to the West has been:

Zimbabwean should not have to pay a further price for their determination to stand by their democratic ideals because the new government does not meet or match the ‘clean slate’ or ‘total victory’ standards expected by the West. As stated earlier, this new government is not perfect, but it does represent all Zimbabweans-it is positive, it is peaceful, it is committed to a new constitution and free and fair elections and, with international support it will succeed.³

The leader of the smaller formation of the MDC, Arthur Mutambara, was even more strident in his critique of the West. Referring to what he called ‘ignorant and un-strategic external involvement in the Zimbabwean discourse’⁴ Mutambara observed:

Here is our message to the US, the British and the Europeans; you must remove all sanctions, any type of measures, call it what you may, that you have imposed on our country. You cannot adopt a wait and see attitude. You cannot give us conditions, such as signs of progress, inclusiveness and entrenchment of democracy and the rule of law. While these are our targets, to achieve them we need financial resources and assistance.⁵

Thus while Mugabe and his party pleaded for the end of sanctions and the need for financial assistance, and in so doing acknowledged their weakened sovereignty, the two MDCs took a more nationalist tone in the cause of the Global Political Agreement (GPA). Notwithstanding the outstanding issues that awaited agreement on the GPA, it was not surprising that there was an emergence, in small steps, of the blurring of certain interests between the contending parties. A central site of struggle in the GPA will be the fight for the state in this period of fragile transition. In the course of such a struggle there are likely to be not only periods of intense polarisation, but also moments of conjunctural commonality of interests between the different parties to the agreement.

² Government of Zimbabwe, **Short Term Economic Recovery Programme (STERP)**, March 2009, pp. 11-12.

³ Morgan Tsvangirai, “Don’t make us pay for working with Mugabe”, newzimbabwe.com 30.04/09.

⁴ Arthur Mutambara, “The Inconvenient Truths about the West”, Harare, 5th January 2009.

⁵ Arthur Mutambara, “ Understanding and Embracing the New Dispensation in Zimbabwe”. Parliamentary Maiden Speech, Harare, 25th March 2009.

For the donors the GPA has posed a particularly thorny set of issues. While for this group, as for the majority of Zimbabweans, the first prize of political struggle was always the defeat of Zanu PF and the removal of Robert Mugabe, the ambiguities and 'unfinished business' of the GPA has posed serious dilemmas relating to forms of engagement with the new interim dispensation. On the basis of the outstanding issues of the GPA the western donor community has argued only for engagement in 'assisting aid organisations' largely around humanitarian issues. Additionally the World Bank has argued that no new financial assistance can be given to the new government until progress is made on the outstanding debt to international financial institutions.

For the MDC in particular, this 'wait and see' approach of the donors poses an enormous problem since, a key point of leverage for the opposition in this current government is its capacity to deliver on financial assistance. The new Finance Minister Tendai Biti has warned that unless international donors urgently inject cash into the government's treasury, 'the consequences will be dire, such as a military coup or civil unrest', further pleading that 'our capacity to deliver is linked to economic stability and we need help.' Another major obstacle in this process has centred around the Reserve Bank Governor Gideon Gono, who played a key role in extending the life of the repressive state through the quasi-fiscal activities of the Bank. For the MDC and the donors the removal of Gono is a prerequisite for the injection of any major new funds through the central bank, while for Mugabe and the military -security apparatus of Zanu PF, Gono's presence is viewed as essential for their continued domination of the transition period. As the battle over this issue has waged on, various attempts have been made to develop parallel structures to channel donor funds into state activities, while excluding the Reserve Bank. Predictably this has caused enormous tension with Zanu PF, and the battle over this issue is likely to be referred to the SADC mediators.

The Challenges of the 'second transition'.

As the battle for the 'second transition' away from authoritarian post-colonial rule continues it is instructive to look at some of the experiences of the Kenya GNU and the possible lessons for Zimbabwe. Amongst the most notable lessons for Zimbabwe are the following:

- While new spaces have opened up for political activity, the transition has also allowed the more repressive forces of the state to become entrenched.
- Dual political structures in the state have created conflicts between the parties.

- There has been loss of public confidence in the institutions of the state and a growing despondency over the lack of progress in the government of national unity.
- There has been some convergence of interest between the parties over the sharing of state resources.
- While the international community played a central role in brokering the deal between Kibaki's Party of National Unity and Odinga's Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), it has not been able to halt the political regression.
- The constitutional review process has been frustratingly slow.
- There have been divisions in civil society over the GNU.
- While the ODM has been frustrated by the GNU it has no viable alternative to the current process.⁶

These are lessons that will resonate strongly in the Zimbabwe context, not the least of which is the seeming lack of a political alternative given the debilitating state of the social forces in the country and the weakened opposition and civic movement, despite the weakened state of Zanu PF itself. The one major difference with the Kenyan situation has been that in Zimbabwe there has been an absence of decentralized militia violence not controlled by the state. Gangs and militias beyond the state have not taken control of towns or rural areas, with the violence in Zimbabwe being the monopoly of the ruling party.⁷ Noting the situation in Kenya since the elections, Lionel Cliffe writes that in Nairobi and Mombasa slums and in contested rural areas the 'logic of protection for communities and political mobilization based on militias has been reinforced among other ethnic groups following the post-election violence and ethnic cleansing, as exemplified by the new militias being formed by local politicians'.⁸ Such a trend is

⁶ For a discussion of these issues see, Kwamchetsi Makokha, 'Riven with divisions: Kenya's singular tragedy'. Pambazuka, Issue 431 07/05/09; and Lionel Cliffe, 'Kenya's Experience of Power-sharing. What implications for Zimbabwe?' Unpublished paper, Leeds, May 2009.

⁷ For a discussion of this see Jocelyn Alexander and Miles Tendi, 'A Tale of Two Elections: Zimbabwe at the Polls in 2008', Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin No 80, Winter 2008, pp. 5-17; See also Suzanne D. Mueller, 'The Political Economy of Kenya's Crisis' and David Anderson and Emma Lochery, 'Violence and Exodus in Kenya's Rift Valley, 2008: Predictable and Preventable?'; both these appear in the Journal of East African Studies, 2,2, 2008. My thanks to Jocelyn Alexander for referring this work to me.

⁸ Cliffe op cit.

not yet apparent in Zimbabwe, though this should not give any cause for complacency in the event of a breakdown of the GPA, the continued deterioration of the economy and the desperation this could engender.

Conclusion.

The politics around the GPA in Zimbabwe has produced a fragile possibility of hope, where this did not exist in the recent past. The conflicts and tensions between the contending political parties, combined with the politics of the donor community and the impending strictures of another round of neo-liberal economic reforms, provide all the ingredients for a hard road to renewal littered with explosive possibilities. The MDC and its supporters stand between an embattled optimism and the realization that the alternatives could be a great deal worse.