



Zimbabwe is a country which has experienced national violence throughout its history. Zimbabwe's state security forces and youth militias have terrorised civilians, gross human rights violations have occurred and disruption has been caused by political organisations.

Factors which contribute to the culture of violence are high levels of unemployment and social discontent, and an HIV/ Aids epidemic. It has been estimated that a third of the country's population may need food aid to survive the coming year.

There is a growing movement working for nonviolent change in Zimbabwe and increasingly the Church are part of it, helping people find a way out of the cycle of violence.



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HISTORY

The name Zimbabwe means "houses of stone" in the Shona language. Its use as the country's name is a tribute to Great Zimbabwe, site of the capital of the Munhumutapa Empire. The Portuguese began their attempts to subdue the Shona state as early as 1505 but were confined to the coast for many years. Then came the British.

The British arrived in the 1890s, under Cecil Rhodes, after whom the area was renamed Rhodesia. A treaty was signed with the British South Africa Company in 1888 allowing them to mine new gold in the kingdom and to use force to impose the terms of the treaty. This treaty made the kingdom a de facto colony and Britain 'granted' Rhodesia self-governing colony status with responsible government in 1923. Various voting reforms promoting majority rule and their respective backlashes were experienced during the 1950's and 1960's and it was then that the political parties Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) formed along with the breakaway Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU).

Both ZAPU and ZANU began campaigns of guerrilla warfare around 1966, which led to escalation in white emigration from Rhodesia. Warfare continued through to 1979, leaving 27,000 dead and leading to what is known as the 'white exodus'. Pressure from South Africa and the USA led to the holding of talks and new elections in 1979, in which black Africans seized the majority for the first time. Renamed Zimbabwe-Rhodesia there were further elections in March 1980, when the rising liberationist Robert Mugabe's ZANU party won a violent election contest. The Republic of Zimbabwe came into being on April 18, 1980.

Following more fractures in the government ZAPU began to wage guerilla war on the new state. Known in Zimbabwe as the Gukurahundi or 'the wind that blows away the chaff'. 20,000 were killed over the next five years by a brigade answerable directly to Mugabe. [1]

ZANU PF AND THE MDC

In 1987 Mugabe became head of state after changing the constitution to usher in his vision of a presidential regime and himself as Executive President. On December 19, 1989 a beleaguered ZAPU was folded into ZANU under the name ZANU-Patriotic Front (ZanuPF), which we know today.

The country's economy has been in a downward spiral ever since. Controversial violent land reforms, a severe drought and the HIV/AIDS epidemic have wrecked the country's economy. Life expectancy at birth in Zimbabwe has declined from 60 to 37 since 1990 and 5.5 million Zimbabweans currently live with the HIV virus. [2]

More recently, in May 2005, ZanuPF struck out again at centres of opposition strength with 'Operation Clean Up Filth', driving people from their homes and markets with bulldozers. Anna Tibaijuka, the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlement Issues in Zimbabwe has estimated that more than 700,000 lost their livelihoods. [3]

NONVIOLENCE IN ZIMBABWE

Violence appears as the one constant in Zimbabwean politics and yet all it has ever led to is an impasse.

Since the late 1990s a movement for nonviolent political change has been built, achieving the "no" vote on the Constitution and the creation of the MDC. After 'Operation Clean out Filth', however, many supporters fell back onto the sidelines. [7] There have been reported problems with youth violence within the MDC as well. [8]

However there are signs that many groups are becoming more active again. There has been renewed moral leadership coming particularly from the Church for an active alternative to more violence. The International Crisis Group's recommends "Zimbabwe's splintered opposition needs to come together to formulate a campaign of nonviolent resistance that channels this anger and frustration into pressure on Mugabe to keep his word to retire by 2008". [9]

Several organisations are actively coordinating meetings and low and high-risk nonviolent activities to demand leaders who will deliver social justice. [10] Catholic Archbishop of Zimbabwe Pius Ncube has recently made high profile calls for Zimbabweans to adopt a nonviolent revolution:

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"[We affirm] with a clear and unambiguous Yes our support of morally legitimate political authority. At the same time we say an equally clear and unambiguous No to power through violence, oppression and intimidation. We call on those who are responsible for the current crisis in our Country to repent and listen to the cry of their citizens. To the people of Zimbabwe we appeal for peace and restraint when expressing their justified grievances and demonstrating for their human rights".

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In 1999, former union leader Morgan Tsvangirai founded the Movement for Democratic Change, a party opposed to Mugabe's rule. Though the party is officially committed to nonviolence, Tsvangirai vowed to use any means necessary, to topple Mugabe. In front of 20,000 supporters he proclaimed: "What we would like to tell Mugabe is please go peacefully. If you don't want to go peacefully, we will remove you violently". [4]

In the June 2000 parliamentary elections, the MDC won almost half the contested seats, prompting a strong repressive backlash towards the opposition and its supporters. As a result, in 2002's internationally criticised presidential elections, Mugabe won yet another term and the MDC has subsequently split and weakened. [5]

There is a strong consensus among human rights organizations that systematic violations of human rights are frequent in Zimbabwe, especially towards those associated with the political opposition. From July 2001 to September 2006, the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum recorded over 20,600 cases of human rights violations by the law enforcement agencies, including over 3,200 cases of torture. [6]

In April 2007, during yet another wave of violence, Tsvangirai and his colleagues were arrested and badly beaten on their way to a prayer rally designed to build opposition and keep up the pressure on the government.

FoR Calls for Action

The Fellowship of Reconciliation, England is assisting its sister branch in Zimbabwe. With our help, FoR Zimbabwe is undertaking a programme of nonviolence and poverty reduction training with young people, helping them to chose a life without violence. At the same time it is very important that we put pressure both on Zimbabwean government and international authorities to improve the lives of the people of Zimbabwe. Here are a number of actions you can take:

- Join the weekly vigil organised by a coalition of groups outside the Zimbabwe High Commission in London every Saturday from 2pm to 6pm. See www.zimvigil.co.uk for more information.
- Write to the Zimbabwean Ambassador, Mr Gabriel Mharadze Machinga, at Zimbabwe House, 429 Strand, London WC2R OSA urging an end to the violent repression of the country's opposition and a commitment to peaceful and democratic change.
- It is also important that our own government keeps up international pressure for changes. Write to your MP urging the government to take strong action on the issue of Zimbabwe.
- Read the latest news on the situation, at www.zimbabwesituation.com.
- Pray for peace and justice in Zimbabwe.
- Make a donations towards FoR's International Peacemakers Fund. Further information and how to make a donation can be made at our website www.for.org.uk/ipf.

Footnotes

- [1] http://www.hrforumzim.com/members_reports/matrep/matrepsumm.htm.
- [2] <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2006&country=7092>.
- [3] http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/zimbabwe/zimbabwe_rpt.pdf.
- [4] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/952796.stm>.
- [5] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/952796.stm>. And; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1870970.stm>
- [6] http://www.hrforumzim.com/special_hrru/Who_guards_the_guards.pdf.
- [7] <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr109.html>.
- [8] http://www.sokwanele.com/articles/sokwanele/violenceistherealenemy_11nov2005.html.
- [9] <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4353&l=1>.
- [10] <http://www.thezimbabwean.co.uk/viewinfo.cfm?id=3896>.
- [11] <http://www.justiceandpeacescotland.org.uk/downloads/zimbabwebishopstatement.pdf>.

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