

The Anatomy of Political Predation: Leaders, Elites and Coalitions in Zimbabwe 1980 - 2010

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This essay offers an interpretation of the rise and fall of Zimbabwe's political economy through the lens of leadership. Of special interest are the actions of elite coalitions that link political parties, the state bureaucracy, and the security sector. We argue that, in Zimbabwe, a predatory civil-military coalition – even when participating in negotiated political settlements – always placed its own political survival and welfare above broader developmental goals.

Research Questions

The paper addresses two main research questions:

- (a) Why, after independence, did a ruling political elite resort more to predation than development?
- (b) Why, even in the face of a current political and economic crisis, have rival elites failed to forge a common developmental coalition?

Overview of the Argument

In addressing the first question, we show that, in consolidating state power, civilian rulers and their military allies violently suppressed political opposition, engaged in corruption, and challenged the economic interests of commercial farming and business elites. In so doing, leaders undermined the institutions of the state and the rule of law.

Politically, they alienated the labor movement and civil society, which went on to form a rival opposition coalition.

Our proposed answer to the second question casts light on the limits of negotiated political settlements. At critical junctures in the country's history – notably at independence in 1980 and with a Global Political Agreement in 2008 – leaders accepted power-sharing arrangements that restricted their freedom of maneuver. Lacking strong leadership commitments, however, the rules underpinning these externally driven, hastily negotiated and reluctantly accepted political settlements in Zimbabwe have never taken root.

Other factors also help to explain Zimbabwe's post-colonial trajectory:

- (a) The inherited structure of a diversified economy enabled an increment of development in the early years of independence. But, by the same token, the legacy of a strong state provided ready-made instruments for repression.
- (b) The political culture of militarized elite, which was forged in the crucible of a national liberation war, led rulers to feel entitled, not only to rule Zimbabwe in perpetuity, but to seize the nation's wealth as they saw fit.

The paper takes the form of an analytic narrative organized chronologically by historical periods.

The narrative is framed in terms of key concepts of leadership: namely how elites, as agents operating within inherited structures and negotiated political settlements, form coalitions for development or predation.

The Independence Decade (1980-1989)

At independence, a favorable institutional legacy and an influx of foreign aid enabled the ZANU-PF government led by Robert Mugabe to deliver development benefits to its rural political base. A constitutional settlement imposed by the departing British government and influence from white farming and business elites initially led to moderate economic policies, for instance on land reform. At the same time, the president pardoned political allies involved in corruption scandals in an early signal that the rule of law would be sacrificed to predation. Indeed, far from concentrating on broad-based economic development, the rulers gave priority to the consolidation of state power by installing party loyalists in the armed forces, civil service and local government. As part of this process, rulers cracked down violently on nationalist rivals in Matabeleland, ultimately absorbing the leaders of PF-ZAPU into the elite coalition.

The Adjustment Decade (1990-1999)

The second decade of independence began with leaders pushing for a *de jure* one-party state, a move ultimately made unnecessary by ZANU-PF's easy *de facto* dominance at the polls. The regime grew increasingly intolerant of dissent and ever more willing to use violence as a campaign tool. The party asserted supremacy over the state by politicizing the bureaucracy and army and turning a blind eye to rent-seeking. Yet, faced with deficits and debts, the government had little choice but to accept reforms to structurally adjust Zimbabwe's outdated economy. Under the leadership of Morgan Tsvangirai, the ZCTU reacted with a series of strikes and stay-aways and, in coalition with civic associations bent on constitutional reform, formed the MDC, an opposition party. For his part, Mugabe was only able to hold together his splintering ruling coalition by using unbudgeted state resources to buy off the militant war veterans.

The Crisis Decade (2000-2008)

The millennium marked the onset of Zimbabwe's descent into political terror and economic collapse. The turning point was a constitutional referendum, in which the opposition scored its first electoral victory. The incumbent elite struck back with land invasions, purges of judges, and the mobilization of militias. A Joint Operations Command (JOC) of security chiefs usurped key policy making functions from the Cabinet and the Reserve Bank became a slush fund for the ruling party and armed forces. The predictable results of these ill-advised policies were economic contraction, disintegrating public services, runaway inflation, and widespread public discontent. After MDC leaders were assaulted at a peaceful rally, external actors from the Southern Africa region stepped up pressure for a political settlement. When a June 2008 presidential election – the most violent in Zimbabwe's history – was blatantly stolen by Mugabe, SADC forced Zimbabwe's rival elite coalitions into an awkward power-sharing settlement.

A Period of Transition (2008-present)

The Global Political Agreement (GPA) of September 2008 led to the formation of a transitional "government of national unity" (GNU) in February 2009. This new settlement was no leader's first choice; both Mugabe and Tsvangirai entered reluctantly. On one hand, the elite accord restored a welcome modicum of peace and economic stability. On the other hand, it papered over key issues, especially how to divide executive power, manage the economy, and ensure civilian control of the armed forces. In practice, the GNU has been unable to implement the central provisions of the GPA, leading to repeated breakdowns in communication and cooperation between President and Prime Minister. The roots of the impasse lie in the Mugabe's unwillingness to share power and resistance to political reform by senior military elements in the dominant coalition. But the divisions, inexperience and organizational weaknesses of the rival MDC coalition are also to blame.

The Way Forward?

The occurrence of a new political settlement marks a critical juncture in Zimbabwe's political evolution. Even if flawed, the current power-sharing agreement signals a break in the monopoly of the ZANU-PF party-state and the onset of some sort of regime transition. Over time, the politics of survival have led the decadent ZANU-PF elites into an increasingly narrow coalition, which now constitutes little more than a cabal of 200 or so military and civilian leaders targeted by Western sanctions. MDC leaders appear to have less self-serving and more broadly developmental aspirations. But the constraints of power-sharing – obstacles imposed by incumbents, a prostrate economy, and lukewarm reengagement by international donors – limit the ability of these inexperienced leaders to blossom into a fully-fledged development coalition.

Results and Lessons

- Like developmental leaders, predatory leaders rely on elite coalitions. In the case of Zimbabwe, the top echelons of the ruling party have always been deeply fused with leaders from military and intelligence backgrounds. This legacy from the liberation war carried over into the postcolonial period.
- As governments mismanage the economy, and as patronage resources shrink, so political elites tend to coalesce around a smaller and smaller set of players. In Zimbabwe, a civil-military coalition radiated hostility to all other sectors, including both business and labor. Over time, it contracted inwardly into the very antithesis of a developmental coalition.
- Political settlements that are externally driven by international actors, hastily negotiated under pressure of time, and reluctantly accepted by the principal parties are unlikely to prove durable or legitimate. Such pacts may quell violence in the short run but they are unlikely to resolve the root causes of political conflict over the long term. One lesson of the Global Political Agreement of 2008 in Zimbabwe is that power-sharing agreements imposed from above by international third parties upon unwilling domestic partners are destined for deadlock, even stalemate.
- Narrow settlements that focus on political

power sharing alone are less likely to endure than comprehensive settlements that also address the stakeholders' economic and military interests.

- In a political culture of predation, civil society organizations can sometimes reproduce the pathological characteristics of state organizations. For example, CSOs or opposition political parties may display a founder's syndrome, a lack of leadership accountability, and reliance of rents and patronage. In this regard, civil society is not always a viable source of an alternative developmental coalition.
- Reformers, whether external or internal, are likely to have most influence over political and developmental outcomes during critical junctures. At moments when old political regimes begin to break down, but before a new set of political rules is put in place, there is room for assertive leaders to mobilize people and resources.
- By the same token, the window of opportunity for reform usually opens only for short periods. The beneficiaries of old political and economic regimes, who are loath to abandon structures that have served them well, can be expected to mount rearguard actions to protect privileges. Unless developmental leaders act quickly and decisively, they can soon find themselves hemmed in by familiar obstacles that permit few points of leverage over outcomes.
- There is need for external actors to undertake informed political analysis in order to understand structural, cultural and institutional contexts and to be able to recognize both the limits of the possible and the political opportunities that sometimes present themselves.

Policy Implications

In Zimbabwe in 2010, the international community should consider the following policies:

- Insist on the full implementation of the terms of the 2008 Global Political Agreement.
- Continue to offer "humanitarian plus" aid programs that help improve the conditions of life for ordinary Zimbabweans (mainly through the Multi-Donor Trust Fund and NGOs).
- Resist the temptation to back particular leaders or coalitions (i.e. picking winners) but,

instead, favor the construction of rules, procedures and institutions.

- Working through the new SADC contact group – South Africa, Mozambique and Zambia – require a free and fair election and a transfer of power to the winner.
- Selectively offer support to civil society organizations, independent media, and democratic political parties that can help ensure that the next national elections are administered freely and fairly. Help build the organizational, professional, analytical, diplomatic and advocacy skills and potentials of these prospective partners.
- Without promising unconditional amnesty to human rights abusers or corrupt predators, provide assurances to ease potential political spoilers out of power.
- Recognizing the West’s limited leverage, carefully consider the appropriate time to relax, suspend, or remove targeted sanctions on the ZANU-PF elite. Require prior compliance with a SADC roadmap for political progress toward a durable democratic settlement.

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