

## **A Bleak Independence Day**

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With presidential election results still undisclosed and reports of violence against opposition, few in mood to celebrate.

Zimbabwe marked 28 years of independence on Friday, April 18, but for many here what was supposed to be a proud and joyous day was overshadowed by fear and uncertainty.

In many countries, independence day is a day for the country's citizens to reflect on their achievements. It should be a day when people on different sides of the political divide come together to celebrate the past, present and future.

Unfortunately for Zimbabweans, independence day comes at a time when the country is entering its fourth week without the publication of results of the presidential election, which President Robert Mugabe is believed to have lost.

The man whom they once admired, cherished and hero-worshipped is refusing to let go of power – or to abide by the democratic principles he fought for in the 1970s war of liberation and claims to uphold.

The country has surely come full circle – the one-time liberator has become the oppressor. Mugabe now maintains the tradition of autocratic rule, which allows leaders to pursue their own interests rather than those of the nation, leading to endemic instability.

Some 28 years after independence, Zimbabweans are still not guaranteed the basic freedoms which they fought for, and are still being subjected to the same aggression from the state, and oppressive laws, which they fought against. Opposition political leaders are still treated with the same brutality, violence and intolerance that nationalists endured and fought against during the colonial era.

Torture, which the late Rhodesian prime minister Ian Smith perpetrated on nationalists in an attempt to destroy liberation movements, is now commonly used against journalists, political activists or anyone critical of government, and particularly of Mugabe.

The government has even resorted to the abduction of opposition supporters, a tactic used by the Smith regime. During the Smith era, Africans did not have political rights and in the post-independence era, Mugabe seems to believe that opposition parties do not have political rights either.

A three-month post-election ban has been imposed on political rallies in the capital, Harare, and police, with no warning, have extended it to other cities as well.

There is an unofficial curfew in poor suburbs. Heavily armed soldiers are patrolling the streets on foot. The soldiers are wearing combat gear with leaves on their helmets, like men in a war zone. This has instilled fear in most residents and has created an environment worse than in the pre-independence era.

It is clear that Mugabe has been yearning to use presidential powers contained in the Temporary Measures

Act to impose a state of emergency.

The ruling party ZANU-PF has been trying to reclaim its revolutionary credentials in the face of major electoral losses in last month's general election. The state-run radio stations and television have been bombarding Zimbabweans with Chimurenga (liberation war) songs and profiling heroes of the war against Rhodesian forces.

On television, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation carries repeats of the speech Mugabe made when he was sworn in on April 18, 1980 as the first prime minister of independent Zimbabwe.

Listeners are constantly reminded that the liberation of Zimbabwe was not given at the Lancaster House talks but was fought for in a protracted armed struggle in which hundreds of thousands died to get land from British imperialists.

But these messages are being received by a population that feels betrayed – a population angry that Mugabe has betrayed the principles under which the liberation struggle was fought.

Nearly 21 days after the March 29 elections, the Zimbabwean authorities are still to release presidential poll results. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission is intending to carry out a recount of results in 23 parliamentary constituencies in an apparent effort to overturn the majority in the House of Assembly won by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

For the first time, ZANU-PF is in the minority in parliament. ZANU-PF won 97 seats, while the opposition got a total of 110 – 99 won by the Morgan Tsvangirai faction of the MDC, with ten for the Arthur Mutambura faction, and one going to an independent candidate, Jonathan Moyo, former information and publicity minister in Mugabe's government.

The March 29 elections were viewed as being as historic as the 1980 elections, which ended decades of colonial rule and a protracted war of liberation. These elections, too, were expected to end the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe.

Instead, the period following the elections is filled with uncertainty and fear of retribution for those people believed to have voted against ZANU-PF and Mugabe.

A new wave of violence has been unleashed in the countryside. Director of the Zimbabwe Civil Education Trust, David Chimhini, who won the Mutasa North parliamentary seat for the MDC, said the ZANU-PF militia and war veterans were re-assembling and getting ready for a presidential run-off.

He said people in his area were really scared and were referring to a re-run of the presidential ballot as the beginning of another war.

The MDC said its activists have been attacked in a campaign of "massive violence" around the country since the elections. MDC secretary-general Tendai Biti said, "Militia are being re-armed, ZANU supporters are being re-armed.... There's been a complete militarisation and a complete re-arming of mobs who led the terror in 2000 and 2002."

He has made several appeals to the Southern African Development Community to act before the violence worsens.

In a passionate plea recently at a press conference, Biti said, "I say to our brothers and sisters across the continent: Don't wait for dead bodies in the streets of Harare."

Targets of the militants are people in traditional ruling party strongholds that voted for the opposition. Huts in the rural areas of Mutoko in Mashonaland East province where the MDC made great inroads have been torched. Those people, now homeless, had nothing to celebrate on independence day. They have been warned about what could happen if they try to vote Mugabe out in a run-off.

In his independence message, United States ambassador to Zimbabwe James McGee said, "Nearly three weeks after elections, the results are still not known, the economic tailspin continues and for many, hope is fading. Even more disturbing are the many reports of violent retribution being carried out in rural communities.

"Since April 8, there is growing evidence that rural communities are being punished for their support for opposition candidates. We have disturbing and confirmed reports of threats, beatings, abductions, burning of homes and even murder, from many parts of the country."

The independence celebrations come a day after reports of a shipment of weapons from China docked in Durban, South Africa, bound for Zimbabwe, heightening fears that Mugabe will not be willing to step down if he loses in a run-off election.

The Chinese ship, the An Yue Jiang, was carrying three million rounds of ammunition, 3,500 mortars and mortar tubes as well as 1,500 rocket-propelled grenades.

Zimbabwean journalist Conrad Mwanawashe said independence celebrations have now become opportunities for Mugabe to issue threats to the opposition and ordinary Zimbabweans.

He remembered the days when he attended independence celebrations in the early 1980s, when people were treated to food and top class entertainment in usually packed stadiums.

"Speeches delivered were often in reference to the successes of the war and achievements by the government. Those were the good times, which showed a new Zimbabwe in which freedom was the cornerstone on which the country's progress was built upon," he said.

"Not so now. That freedom has been washed thinner and thinner each day. Speeches have [switched] from [the listing] of the government's achievements over the years to a hate and blame game. It has now become a platform to attack presumed enemies of the government."

Nonthando Bhebhe is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe.

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