

Mugabe Signs Away Sweeping Powers

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At remarkable ceremony, dejected-looking Mugabe promises to honour power-sharing deal so nation could begin process of reconstruction.

Zimbabwe's political rivals smiled for the cameras, the crowds cheered and the bitter enemies shook hands.

Six months after the country's momentous March 29 general elections, which delivered to President Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party their first electoral loss in almost three decades, the veteran 84-year-old leader was, on September 15, forced to agree to sharing power with opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, leader Morgan Tsvangirai, Zimbabwe's prime minister designate.

Mugabe signed away his sweeping powers to Tsvangirai in a remarkable ceremony attended by a full complement of Southern African Development Community, SADC, heads of state or their representatives.

Analysts immediately warned that the power-sharing deal was fragile and will require former enemies to put aside their differences and work closely to overcome scepticism.

With nervous glances and awkward handshakes, ZANU-PF formally ceded its near-total monopoly on power to the MDC. And, as opposition party members witnessed the ceremony, their flag-waving, singing supporters danced in the streets, welcoming a new era they hope will end the economic meltdown that has seen inflation skyrocket to more than 11-million per cent.

"I have signed this agreement because I believe it represents the best opportunity for us to build a peaceful, prosperous, democratic Zimbabwe," Tsvangirai said after the ceremony. "I have signed this agreement because my belief in Zimbabwe and its peoples runs deeper than the scars I bear from the struggle. I have signed this agreement because my hope for the future is stronger than the grief I feel for the needless suffering of the past years."

In his speech, a dejected-looking Mugabe gave a solemn promise to see that the deal was honoured to the letter so Zimbabweans could embark on the task of nation-building and reconstruction.

"We are committed to deal. We will do our best," he said. "To the opposition I say congratulations, while expressing the fervent hope that you will shoulder your weighty responsibilities with dignity, a sense of responsibility and seriousness of purpose."

However, true to form, he railed against the British and saluted "African leaders for solving an African problem".

As cannons boomed and fighter jets whizzed over the capital, thousands of people flocked to see the spectacle.

"I took off from work; I had to see it for myself," Cynthia Makaza, 21, a hairdresser, told IWPR at the

sidelines of the signing ceremony. Hundreds more crowded into the conference centre to witness the historic occasion.

The signing, beamed live on Zimbabwe television, touched off a carnival mood in MDC strongholds, relief in many parts of the country and general optimism among a battered and anxious population.

The world watched South Africa president Thabo Mbeki together with his United Nations reference group representative Haile Menkerios, and African Union chairman Jakaya Kikwete as they brought together the erstwhile rivals.

Britain and the United States, who have stridently pushed for "real power-sharing" to break the crippling impasse arising from a discredited presidential election run-off, swiftly welcomed the development and, in a joint statement, European Union foreign ministers said, "The EU is ready notably to adopt a series of measures of economic support and help to a transition government that took measures to restore democracy and rule of law in Zimbabwe, notably by organising transparent and pluralistic elections."

The deal – which will be entrenched in a new constitution – creates the post of executive prime minister, who will supervise ministers and lead government in parliament. It also provides for the sharing of cabinet positions based on the total number of votes cast for each party in the March 29 poll.

The parties will share 31 cabinet posts, with 15 ministries for ZANU-PF, 13 for the Tsvangirai MDC and three for the Mutambara MDC.

The arrangement, which could usher in a new era of reform, will assume legal and constitutional force when parliament is summoned, possibly this week or early next week.

Mugabe was expected to announce the formation of a new all-inclusive cabinet and ZANU-PF legal affairs secretary Patrick Chinamasa told IWPR that the parties had worked out a full list of ministries but there had as yet been no allocations. The MDC is anxious to take control of the important ministries of finance, industry, home affairs, justice and foreign affairs.

Analysts say a truly representative coalition cabinet is crucial to unlocking key financial support.

"The establishment of an all-inclusive and competent coalition cabinet is a critical first step in the effort to woo back western donors, who have withdrawn desperately needed financial assistance from Zimbabwe, saying the economy is severely mismanaged," said economic commentator Best Doroh.

"The inclusion of private-sector business leaders to head key economic ministries could be a powerful signal that this is the time for fundamental change.

There is a need for new ministers who have the political clout to make painful but critical economic decisions."

John Makumbe, a political science professor at the University of Zimbabwe, said the MDC has devised a promising economic recovery and rehabilitation programme, known as RESTART, for the transitional period, which, he hoped, might kick-start the economy.

"It is my considered view that if that programme is effectively implemented, the Zimbabwean economy could recover within as short a period as two to three years," said Makumbe. "Part of the RESTART programme seeks to attract both domestic and foreign direct investment in order to revive previously existing industries as well as to expand those that are currently operating at 25 per cent to 30 per cent of their original capacity. The programme also seeks to encourage as many skilled Zimbabweans as possible to return home and help rebuild the shattered economy."

Several development cooperation agencies have already indicated their interest in resuming or renegotiating appropriate development assistance programmes with the new government.

The RESTART programme will also focus on the revival of the crucial agricultural sector by, for example, creating a land commission to examine such matters as multiple land-holding practices and the under-utilisation of arable land. The power-sharing deal calls for a "comprehensive, transparent and non-partisan" land audit to ensure individuals do not own too many farms.

It also calls upon the British government to accept the primary responsibility for paying compensation for land acquired from former landowners for resettlement. Zimbabwe's government has repeatedly accused Britain of reneging on an agreement to compensate farmers who lost their land during land reforms.

The political shift is nothing short of extraordinary for Tsvangirai, who lacks any experience in government but will have the task of turning the economy around.

He will have to achieve this with relatively new faces in the legislature who are still learning parliamentary rules and how to find their way through a building most have only seen on television.

The 100 MPs in Tsvangirai's parliamentary caucus in the 210-seat legislature are teachers, lawyers, students and small-businessmen who are bewildered by government budgets and committees. Some are scrambling to find money to rent offices or print business cards.

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