

## **Scepticism at Bank Chief's Call for Change**

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Central banker prescribes political harmony as the cure to Zimbabwe's political ailments, but critics say he is part of the problem.

One of President Robert Mugabe's closest allies has issued a sharp rebuke to Zimbabwe's leaders for allowing political and economic problems to fester.

Gideon Gono, governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, told the state-owned Herald newspaper in an interview last week that the country would not achieve an immediate economic turnaround unless key stakeholders found the political will to deal honestly with the country's crisis.

People should not expect the central bank to solve the country's problems "while political leaders continue to play bickering games", he said.

Gono's interview, published on July 10, coincided with the beginning of talks in Pretoria at which ZANU-PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, were supposed to hammer out a basis for full negotiations that might lead to a power-sharing deal. His remarks may have been intended to steer the ruling party towards compromise rather than a continuation of the destructive policies which have brought pushed the country to its knees.

Without accusing any individual, he said, "Our economy has remained hostage to lack of unity and lack of one vision among political players in the country."

He warned that the Zimbabwean economy did not operate "in a vacuum; nor does it exist as another world separate from our national politics".

Gono could not conceal his frustration that this year's elections had failed to offer Zimbabwe a new start, and he said there was a need for "national healing" to get the country functioning again.

"The only way forward for our country is for Zimbabweans to come together and to speak with one voice," he said. "We have been saddened to see how the outcome of the harmonised [first-round] elections held on March 29 has led to unprecedented political disharmony in the country. That cannot be good for the economy."

As the controller of monetary policy, Gono has been a central pillar of Mugabe's economic policies. He is senior enough to be included in the 13 associates of the president targeted by United States sanctions.

Since he took over as Reserve Bank governor, however, the annual inflation rate has gone from an already massive 619 per cent to the current 10 million per cent. Mugabe's land appropriation scheme devastated agriculture, and economic collapse across the board has led to a situation where eight out of ten people are unemployed and even the most basic commodities are in short supply.

A senior ZANU-PF official who sits on the party's governing body, the politburo, said the views expressed

by Gono reflected those held by many members of the ruling establishment, who were becoming increasingly frustrated with Mugabe.

“The majority of people in the politburo and the [ZANU-PF] central committee are against Mugabe’s policies and his continued stranglehold on power, but there is a small but powerful cabal of people who call the shots,” said the official, who did not want to be named. “They include Gono himself and they have continued to prop him up.”

This official claimed that many senior ZANU-PF members – himself included – were unaware of the violence perpetrated in the party’s name.

“The majority of us in the politburo did not have a clue as to how the violent crackdown on the opposition was planned and who spearheaded it,” he said. “But now that it seems the chickens are coming back home to roost. Even those who are closest to Mugabe, including Gono, are beginning to see the futility of their effort and seem to be applying tentative pressure on him to rescue the country from its plight.”

Analysts said it was obvious that Gono’s comments amounted to an attack on Mugabe, but criticised him for not naming names.

Eldred Masunungure, a politics lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe, said the central banker should have come straight out and said who was really to blame for the crisis.

In the interview, Gono appeared to suggest that the ZANU-PF and the MDC were both to blame for failing to come to terms and find common cause so as to turn the economy around.

“The trouble is that Gono is being dishonest in his diagnosis of the causes of the crisis,” said Masunungure. “He wants to play the role of a middleman in brokering peace but speaks as if both parties [ZANU-PF and MDC] are equally culpable. If he wants to gain our sympathy, he must come out in the open about what his principals [superiors] have done to the economy.”

Masunungure said the central bank chief had realised rather too late the limitations of his own approach to the crisis. When he came onto the scene in 2003, he thought he could “de-link the economy from politics”, said Masunungure, but instead found himself embroiled in political matters, and at times at loggerheads with Mugabe.

“Gono got everything upside down from the start,” said Masunungure. “He thought he could achieve an economic turnaround before a political turnaround, which is what Zimbabwe needs. Now he has seen the light, that he was wrong, but still will not tell his principals the truth.

“The only positive thing is that at least he has learnt something, albeit late. It’s better late than never.”

The lecturer said it was vital for Gono to make ZANU-PF understand it could no longer govern the country without cooperating with the opposition, especially now that the MDC controls the lower house of parliament.

Despite Gono's appeal for harmony, few Zimbabweans view him as a disinterested player.

"If he had remained just a central bank governor and not a politician, our economy would have been managed better," said Abel Gaba, a shop assistant in Harare. "He is saying what he is saying in an attempt to distance himself from the mess he has helped to create. He should have spoken about national healing before June 27 [second-round presidential election], not now when we all know his role in the bloodbath."

He said, however, that more and more of Mugabe's allies should add their voices to the chorus already pressuring Mugabe to change his ways.

A businessman in Harare said Mugabe would need to come under a little more pressure from his most trusted lieutenants if he was to soften his stance.

"Gono's statement might be a question of too little, too late, but Mugabe needs quite a little bit of prodding from his allies because they realise - like business realises - the economy has reached the point of no return," he said.

Mugabe's victory in the second round, following opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai's decision to pull out, has been dismissed as a sham by some members of the Southern African Development Community and the African Union, as well as by the European Union and the US.

The US and Britain called for tougher sanctions against Mugabe and 13 key officials, including Gono, but a draft United Nations resolution was vetoed by China and Russia on July 11.

Joseph Sithole is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe.

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