

A Sense of Impunity

Author: [Benedict Unendoro](#)

A legacy of international inaction encourages Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe to believe there is no price to pay for his crackdown on opponents.

The universal condemnation of the police assault on Zimbabwean opposition leaders on March 11 is unlikely to move President Robert Mugabe. Ordinary Zimbabwean interviewed by IWPR say their president has got away with this kind of thing for decades, and the international community has done little more than issue protests from a safe distance.

Fifty opposition leaders on their way to attend a prayer meeting at Zimbabwe Grounds in the working class suburb of Highfield, Harare, were arrested and then savagely assaulted in police cells on March 11.

The images of a badly beaten Morgan Tsvangirai, president of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, that flashed round the globe this week may have jolted the international community from its slumber.

Zimbabwe's main opposition leader, Tsvangirai was in intensive care after sustaining serious head injuries from a police beating. Other prominent opposition figures also suffered serious injuries.

Tsvangirai left hospital on March 16. He and others had been released into the custody of their lawyers three days earlier as police had not completed the paperwork relating to possible charges.

Yet the new international outcry seems unlikely to alarm President Mugabe, given that he has not been swayed by similar criticism of his past actions over the last 27 years.

"Mugabe's story since independence in 1980 is a bloody trail of mass murder and the torture of political opponents," said Thompson Zhou, a teacher in the farming town of Kadoma.

"With such a track-record, why would Mugabe lose sleep over the recent round of condemnation over the torture of Tsvangirai and company?"

In the Eighties, Mugabe began consolidating his position by sending North Korean-trained troops into Matabeleland and the Midlands to attack supporters of ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo.

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace subsequently found that more than 20,000 people - most of them from the Ndebeli ethnic group which was ZAPU's constituency - died or disappeared during a five-year reign of terror known as "Gukurahundi" - which roughly means "sorting the chaff from the grain".

The killings received universal condemnation, but no international action was taken to stop them.

In the run-up to general elections in 1990, the head of the Central Intelligence Organisation, CIO, in the Midlands region, Elias Kanengoni, and senior ZANU-PF Youth League official Kizito Chivamba shot

opposition candidate Patrick Kombayi, who had made the mistake of running against Mugabe's deputy, Simon Muzenda. Even though a Zimbabwean court found the two men guilty of attempted murder and the Supreme Court upheld the conviction, Mugabe promptly pardoned them.

In 1999, two journalists, the late Mark Chavunduka and Ray Choto, were tortured by the military for a week after publishing a report about a failed plot within the Zimbabwean army. The international community called for a commission of inquiry, but Mugabe ignored the demand and instead praised the soldiers who held the men captive.

The Mugabe government went on to launch wide-ranging attacks on whole sections of the population, defying his critics abroad.

In 2000, his loyalists embarked on a campaign to force white farmers off their land, using violence against workers as well as owners and their families. Several farmers were killed and more than a quarter of a million farmworkers lost their jobs and homes.

The official rationale was that the farms were needed for landless Zimbabweans, but many believed the government was punishing the farmers, who were seen as part of the opposition to a controversial constitution, which was defeated in a referendum in February 2000.

The broadest attack of all came in May 2005, when the Zimbabwean leader sent police and soldiers into poor suburbs to destroy homes and shops in what he called Operation Murambatsvina ("Sweep Away the Rubbish") and characterised as an urban regeneration project. Once again, critics said the authorities' real intention was to destroy or disperse communities seen as potential recruiting-grounds for the opposition.

United Nations special envoy Anna Tibaijuka reported that 700,000 people lost their means of livelihood and 2.5 million their homes as a result of Operation Murambatsvina.

Victims called the campaign "Bob's Tsunami" because the scale of the population dislocation was comparable to a natural disaster.

Many Zimbabweans remain frustrated with the failure of the international community, and other African states in particular, to take decisive measures to curb Mugabe's policies.

"We know there is no one who can save us," said a woman at the wake held for Gift Tandare, the man killed by police as they moved to head off the March 11 meeting at Highfield. "We can't even save ourselves because of the brutality of the state machinery. So we have no choice but to leave this in the hands of the Creator."

Although the European Union and North American countries have imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe, including an arms embargo, the country has other sources of military and security equipment. China provides weapons while Israel has supplied water cannons.

Zimbabwe's cosy relationship with China has obstructed moves to address concerns at the United Nations Security Council, as Beijing simply exercises its veto.

Within Africa itself, Mugabe has been under little pressure to change from fellow-leaders. South African president Thabo Mbeki, for example, refuses to condemn Mugabe's actions and instead promotes a policy of "quiet diplomacy".

Mugabe has distanced himself from the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development, NEPAD, dismissing it as a western ploy to re-colonise the continent.

Tanzanian president Jikaya Kikwete flew into Harare for emergency talks on March 15. As expected, little came out the meeting. Mugabe emerged as defiant as ever, saying that his critics in the West could "go hang".

Benedict Unendoro is the pseudonym of a journalist in Harare.

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