

Tsvangirai Facing Critical Choices

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No one is quite clear what the opposition's next step will be, but any delay will benefit the president most. Zimbabwe's political stalemate looks set to continue as President Robert Mugabe settles in for another term and Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, struggles to respond to the new, post-election environment.

Tsvangirai, who pulled out of the presidential race five days before the June 27 run-off, now faces a dilemma over whether to accept Mugabe's offer of talks or to claim the moral high ground by refusing compromise.

The MDC leader has been bolstered by support from traditional sympathisers United States, Britain and Australia, now joined by France and Italy, as well as by Botswana's refusal to recognise Mugabe as president.

As foreign governments continue to question Mugabe's legitimacy and ponder additional sanctions against Zimbabwe, any decision they take will be influenced by what Tsvangirai does next.

Some observers believe that while the opposition leader's withdrawal from the election was motivated by principle – he argued that taking part would lead to more bloodshed – it was a tactical blunder nonetheless.

They believe he was calculating that Mugabe would halt the election process and simply declare himself winner. That would have allowed Tsvangirai to urge the international community to recognise him as president since he beat Mugabe in the first round, held on March 29.

Since Mugabe went ahead with the ballot anyway, the position has become much muddier,

Analysts say any delay in the political process could now work in Mugabe's favour, allowing him to consolidate his hold on power and giving his ZANU-PF party time to consider another option – finding a successor from within the regime to keep international criticism at bay.

According to Eldred Masunungure, a political sciences lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe, if the regime were able to engineer a seamless change of leadership, allowing Mugabe to step aside, Zimbabwe's southern African neighbours might be prepared to overlook the flawed election.

"The dynamics in the region and the international community might change and the MDC find itself forgotten again," he said. "The region is feeling the contagion of the Zimbabwean crisis and will grasp at anyone who promises a quick end to this."

Two days before the African Union issued its call for power-sharing in a "government of national unity", Mugabe used his June 29 inauguration ceremony to make what sounded like conciliatory noises, saying he was prepared to negotiate with the MDC as long as it shared his vision of the country's future.

However, he returned from the African Union summit in more belligerent mood, demanding that Tsvangirai and the MDC recognise him as president before he would contemplate negotiations. He also demanded that the West lift the sanctions imposed on him and his inner circle after his disputed election victory in 2000.

Tsvangirai, meanwhile, declared last week that he would not negotiate with an “illegitimate president”.

When South African president Thabo Mbeki paid a fleeting visit to Zimbabwe at the weekend in a bid to revive his mediation effort between the MDC and ZANU-PF, Tsvangirai refused to meet him on the grounds that going to the venue, State House, would be tantamount to acknowledging Mugabe as head of state.

The Zimbabwean opposition views the South African leader’s claim to neutrality with more than a little suspicion, suspecting him of favouring Mugabe.

Mbeki has been acting as mediator on behalf of the Southern African Development Community, SADC, a grouping of regional states. The recent African Union summit asked the SADC to continue leading the mediating effort instead of taking on a more robust role itself, as some had hoped it would.

Some observers say continued reluctance to engage in negotiations could prove another error on Tsvangirai’s part. He may occupy the high ground, but he might have to make concessions in the face of demands for an end to Zimbabwe’s profound political and economic crisis.

“Mugabe says he wants to talk, so Tsvangirai has got to talk, otherwise people will see him as the stumbling block to the resolution of the crisis,” said Richard Chitova, a rural school teacher in Mashonaland Central province. “People are tired of the crisis and want it to end quickly.”

Masunungure agreed with this view, saying, “Dialogue is unavoidable and inevitable. Neither of the parties has a solution to the country’s structural problems on his own.... Tsvangirai may have the legitimacy but he doesn’t have political power. Mugabe’s legitimacy may be questionable but he has the means to remain in power.”

Should negotiations take place, Masunungure notes that the MDC will be forced to accept a lesser role since Mugabe is now officially president again.

“The trouble is that while the MDC was preoccupied with means and legality, Mugabe wanted to retain power by any means necessary and that is what he has done. He has already been installed, though we should not confuse legality and legitimacy,” he said.

Tsvangirai’s dilemma about what his next move should be is complicated by the high risks associated with deploying one of his most powerful forms of leverage – asking the international community to impose more sanctions on Zimbabwe.

The United States and its allies have proposed tougher sanctions and have even suggested the

introduction of a peacekeeping force to stem the bloodletting.

According to Masunungure, an open call for sanctions could alienate Tsvangirai both from his voters and from other African nations.

“This is a tricky issue,” said Masunungure. “They [the MDC] cannot call for the imposition of more sanctions on the country when people are suffering. This would alienate even the support of SADC [Southern African Development Community] neighbours. Similarly, the MDC cannot boast of its ability to bring foreign aid to revive the economy without being accused of supporting the current sanctions. It’s a double-edged sword.”

So it is back to the drawing board again, and that could spell a further period of political violence, as well as the apparently endless economic meltdown.

The MDC says more than 100 of its supporters were killed by pro-Mugabe militias before and during the second-round election.

Masunungure argues that on its own, Mugabe’s government can do nothing useful to save the economy.

Inflation has reached astronomical heights, unemployment stands at 85 per cent of the population, and food and fuel are in short supply.

The food situation worsened in the run-up to the presidential run-off, as the government banned aid groups from operating in the countryside, accusing them of using food distribution as a campaign tool for the MDC – a claim these organisations deny.

Mike Nyoni is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe.

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