

## **Zimbabwe Government Talks Appear Doomed**

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Less than four weeks after the signing of a power-sharing deal in Zimbabwe, it looks increasingly likely that the ongoing talks on the formation of a transition government are doomed to failure, and that Zimbabwe will remain in the deepening rut in which it has been for the past several years.

Last week, representatives of the two main parties, ZANU-PF and the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, met on several occasions, but failed to break the deadlock over two key ministries: home affairs and the ministry of finance.

The power-sharing deal signed in mid-September allocates 15 ministries to ZANU-PF, 13 to the MDC led by Morgan Tsvangirai, and 3 to the MDC splinter faction headed by Arthur Mutambara.

Talks over who should get which ministry have been dragging on for weeks.

Over the weekend, matters took a turn for the worse, when ZANU-PF decided to unilaterally allocate itself several key ministries: home affairs, foreign affairs, information, local government and finance.

Last week's lack of progress had already prompted Tsvangirai to declare that the talks had deadlocked, and to appeal for outside facilitation – specifically for the return of former South African president Thabo Mbeki to mediate between his party and ZANU-PF.

The fact that Tsvangirai appealed to Mbeki, with whom he has had a difficult relationship, and whose mediation he has frequently criticised, seems to indicate a high level of frustration with ZANU-PF.

Mbeki was due to travel to Harare October 13 in an attempt to smooth over the growing differences between the two parties, but it is unclear how much he can accomplish, as ZANU-PF has steadfastly maintained that there is no need for outside mediation.

This is Mbeki's first trip to Harare since the power-sharing agreement was signed in September and since he was ousted from his post as president of South Africa.

ZANU-PF's rejection of renewed mediation, and its obvious snub of the MDC finally betrays what many have long suspected: that ZANU-PF has no intention of sharing significant power with the opposition.

Analysts have consistently suggested that ZANU-PF hardliners are pressuring President Robert Mugabe not to surrender key ministries, as this would amount to a transfer of real power, a reality which they clearly cannot abide.

ZANU-PF's actions over the weekend would seem to indicate that the hardliners have won yet again, stealing not only the most powerful cabinet posts, but also crushing whatever good will and faith there ever was between itself and the opposition.

ZANU-PF's arrogant response to questions about why it made the unilateral declaration is that it has not violated any of the terms of the power-sharing deal, which accords Mugabe the powers to appoint and convene a cabinet. Although this may be true in technical terms, it is also patently obvious that the move will alienate the opposition and deal a severe blow to the agreement.

If ZANU-PF does not back down, the MDC will make good on its threat to pull out of the agreement, precisely the outcome ZANU-PF is probably hoping for. If the MDC pulls out, ZANU-PF's formidable spin machine will no doubt blame the opposition for the demise of the agreement. Critics of the Mugabe regime and opposition supporters will not fall for this, but that is of little concern to ZANU-PF, which has consistently successfully relied on dodgy logic to defend its actions.

The MDC will denounce the government, as it has done in the past, but it is questionable whether anyone will listen. Western governments have adopted a wait-and-see approach to the power-sharing agreement, a stance which seems vindicated by the near-collapse of the process. It is unclear what type of leverage – if any – they could, or would be willing to use, to bring the process back on track.

More importantly, neither the Southern African Development Community, SADC, nor the African Union, AU, have raised their voices in an attempt to move the power-sharing process forward, in spite of signs from early on that the agreement was teetering. Mugabe sets great store by the support of his fellow African leaders from whose solidarity he derives much of his continental credibility. Historically, both the SADC and the AU have been reluctant to criticise Mugabe; this is not expected to change anytime soon.

The result of all of this could easily be that the situation reverts to the inertia that has so long characterised the Zimbabwe crisis. The MDC may attempt to exert pressure by organising stay-aways and other popular protests, but these rarely garner much support from the exhausted and impoverished population, and only tend to damage the MDC's image.

*The views expressed in this article are not necessarily the views of IWPR.*

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