

Full Length Research Paper

On the brink of an Arab spring-style conflict: Zimbabwe's quagmire and policy options

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The aim of this study is to examine the political and economic challenges facing Zimbabwe in relation to the potential of generating a violent uprising resembling the Arab Spring civil conflicts. Zimbabwe is in a quagmire due to security, political and economic upheavals that have bedeviled the Southern African country since the end of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2013. The government seems to be reluctant to acknowledge the magnitude of the situation and let alone address it. That is the most worrisome thing. If the situation continues unabated, these problems have a potential of generating a violent uprising whose course and effects could equate those that hit North African states since 2010. Data for this study was gathered from secondary data sources including desktop research, books, newspapers and journal articles.

Key words: Arab Spring, peace, security, Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has been in a crisis since the end of the inclusive government in 2013. The crisis is largely attributable to the misplacement of priorities by the new government and it continues to display a carefree attitude, there is a high risk of implosion into a civil conflict like what happened in the Arab Spring. Since the year 2000, Zimbabwe has been on the international radar largely due to the political and economic crisis that affected the country to 2008. The crisis was blamed on Zanu PF's bad governance, corruption, alleged human rights abuses and sanctions. The emergence of the Government of National Unity between Zanu PF and the two MDC formations ushered in a new political and economic dispensation that saw economic transformation and political stability. The end of the inclusive

government saw Zanu PF winning elections in 2013 attracted discontentment as people predicted doom due Zanu PF's record of misrule. As have been said and predicted, Zanu PF serious misrule is plunging the country into a comatose state.

However, if action is taken now things might return to normalcy. The present situation has a potential of generating an uprising because the politico-economic atmosphere in the country is conducive for a rebellion. Usually, Zimbabwean citizens are relatively peaceful and passive to an extent they hardly resort to confrontational politics. But opposition parties, civil society organisations, disgruntled expelled former Zanu PF members and external actors such as foreign governments and embassies seem to be working overtime to influence

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social, economic and political change. They are doing that not for the sake of doing it, but they are just taking advantage of the present crisis, hence government should address the problem urgently. Civil unrest is degenerative, hence the need map progressive strategies to curb the current state of affairs.

Economically, the rate of unemployment is skyrocketing; estimated to be above 80%, civil servants are not getting their wages and salaries on time, service delivery is very poor, infrastructure is deteriorating at an alarming rate and poverty is on the rise. Furthermore, there is huge youth bulge in the country. Politically, the political temperature in the country is high due to political bickering between and within political parties, power struggles, bad governance, human rights abuses, lack of rule of law and economic downturn. While majority of these problems maybe recognised as issues of low politics, it is high time the government acknowledges being in a dilemma and come up with relevant progressive policy options as alternatives to realist oriented politics. If the situation is not addressed with urgency, Zimbabwe would be heading for a conflict between the government on one side and opposition parties, civil society organisations and the general populace. Opposition parties and civil society organisations have the critical mass to institute a rebellion against the government; a scenario that is detrimental to peace and security in the country.

In terms of security, there seems to be a real threats to national security in Zimbabwe posed by disgruntled people who were expelled from the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF). Opposition parties are also posing a security threat to peace and security in the country. Ever since their expulsion from the government and Zanu PF party in December 2014, former Presidential Affairs minister Didymus Mutasa, former Agriculture minister Rugare Gumbo, former War Veterans leader Jabulani Sibanda and former Mashonaland West parliamentarian Temba Mliswa have been issuing public statements inciting violence. Movement for Democratic Change-T (MDC-T) leader Morgan Tsvangirai has also been issuing statements relating to instigating a nationwide revolt for political and economic change.

To address the earlier mentioned problems before they spiral out of control, a lot needs to be done as a matter of urgency to curb the occurrence of a civil conflict. There is need to map a way forward characterised by policies promoting good governance, good service delivery, employment creation, human rights protection, rule of law and an end to unnecessary power struggles. Above all, the government should prioritise address the concerns of the citizens in a manner that is acceptable and in line with international minimum standard. A state of the nation address by the head of state or other high ranking official or officials acknowledging the problems facing the nation and promising to rectify the situation would also work to avoid civil unrest in the country.

Contextual analysis

The Arab Spring refers to a wave of violent and no violent democratic uprisings characterised by demonstrations, protests, riots and civil wars which began on 18 December 2010 in Tunisia and spread across the Arab world¹. The uprisings were triggered by discontentment which arose from economic woes, bad governance and human rights abuses among other factors. These are the same problems prevalent in Zimbabwe at the present moment and there are elements within the country calling for revolting against the government. In case people decide to revolt against the government, the scenario would resemble the Arab Spring and it may spill over into neighboring states.

On 7 March 2015, the Daily News reported that the MDC-T leader Morgan Tsvangirai was plotting massive peaceful demonstrations “to force President Robert Mugabe’s government to act on the plight of millions of desperate Zimbabweans who are plagued by rising poverty, hunger and disease” amid economic meltdown in the country². Tsvangirai was quoted saying:

“We have the capacity to mobilise and there is no doubt that we have the capacity to exploit the current state of affairs”³.

It should be noted that uprisings in some of the Arab countries in the wake of the Arab Spring began as mere peaceful protests which later became violent. The same could happen in Zimbabwe. Peaceful protests are permitted in accordance the Zimbabwean law, but there is no guarantee that if anti-governments protests begin as peaceful they will end peacefully. Human nature is known to be violent unless and until it restrained by fear or death. In this regard, the police or army may be sent to restore order in the event of the outbreak of protests and demonstrations in Zimbabwe. In response, the protesters may clash with the security personnel and this could trigger unprecedented civil unrest.

Politicians who were expelled from Zanu PF in the run-up to the December 2014 congress have also issued statements implying challenging the government for failing to improve the economy. Rugare Gumbo, Jabulani Sibanda and Didymus Mutasa have been making such statements since their expulsion and they have also insinuated joining forces with opposition parties and other political actors. Former Presidential Affairs minister Didymus Mutasa was quoted saying:

“The economy is in a very bad shape and we need to bring all democratic forces together so as to save the country, which they (ZANU PF) are failing to rescue from

¹ www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/ArabSpring

² <http://www.dailynews.co.zw/articles/2015/03/07/tsvangirai-plots-massive-demos>

³ Ibid

complete implosion. We have been in talks with other like-minded people like MDC Renewal Team leader Tendai Biti, Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) leader Dumiso Dabengwa and Mavambo/Kusile/Dawn leader Simba Makoni. The idea is for all forces to come together and challenge the illegal post-congress ZANU PF⁴.

Two things can be deduced from these statements. First, the state of the economy is the grievance propelling the proposed resort to protest against the government. Indeed, the state of the economy in Zimbabwe leaves a lot to be desired. Unemployment is rising, companies are closing down, health services have deteriorated and service delivery is poor. The cause for a violent nationwide revolt is indeed justifiable. Second and most important, there are indications that the expelled politicians want to take advantage of the state of affairs to pursue their political interests. If the last statement is anything to go by, one can safely conclude that there is an element of power politics and disgruntlement. The last statement reads,

"The idea is for all forces to come together and challenge the illegal post-congress Zanu PF"⁵.

Coupled with other economic challenges, the high rate of unemployment especially among the youth in Zimbabwe is one factor that poses the risk of violent protests and demonstrations. Independent economists estimate the overall rate of unemployment in Zimbabwe to be over 80%. The most affected people are the youth who constitute majority of the populations in the country and the most disgruntled are graduates from tertiary institutions. It is argued that more than 300 000 students are graduating from schools, colleges and universities annually to join millions who are already jobless⁶. Many graduates have been turned into vendors selling recharge cards, vegetables and fruits among other things⁷. A large population of youth out of employment is dangerous because they can be easily recruited or mobilised to start a rebellion. According to the youth bulge theory, "societies with rapidly growing young populations often end up with rampant unemployment and large pools of disaffected youths who are more susceptible to recruitment into rebel or terrorist groups" (Beehner, 2007)⁸. To go by this theory, the existence of a youth bulge in Zimbabwe increases the chance of the occurrence of a violent revolt in the country the same way it triggered the Arab Spring.

Furthermore, failing to pay wages and salaries of civil

servants on time presents a time that could explode anytime generating civil unrest in the country. A revolution almost started in mid-March when university lecturers downed tools and students staged violent campus demonstrations against the government's failure to pay their lecturers. On the 16th of March 2015, lecturers from Midlands State University (MSU), University of Zimbabwe (UZ), Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) and National University of Science (NUST) went on strike over unpaid February salaries and December bonuses⁹. There was chaos at UZ as students destroyed infrastructure in response to lecturers' strike. Putting the blame on the government, Gilbert Mutubuki the president of the Zimbabwe National Students Union expressed discontented;

"We are not happy with the strike by the lecturers because it is compromising our education and is happening when we have struggled to pay fees... the issue of food and grants remain unresolved and we are saying the time is now for the government to address and take us seriously"¹⁰.

Had others joined the student demonstrations, the situation could have generated into an internal strife. Moreover, service delivery in Zimbabwe is below standard and poverty is obliterating millions of people in the country. In both urban and rural areas, majority of people are living below the poverty datum line. Food insecurity is affecting the country due to unemployment, drought, poor wages and salaries as well as other economic hardships.

More so, roads, buildings and other infrastructure are deteriorating and the government is not paying attention to maintain and renovate the country's infrastructure. Coupled with other grievances, these socio-economic problems have a potential of causing a revolution in Zimbabwe. The Chikurubi prison uprising in March 2015 which was triggered by hunger and poor living conditions in the prison was a clear sign of disaster to come. Political and economic analysts in the country have also warned of the likelihood of civil unrest in the country. The Daily News on 15 March 2015 reported that, "Unrest and a morbid spirit of lawlessness among Zimbabweans, fed up by escalating anger against President Robert Mugabe and his Zanu PF government, is fast spreading around the country"¹¹. Political analyst Maxwell Saungwene warned that:

"Things are not well, with hunger and desperation everywhere in the country. We are really reaching the boiling point now, with the least events including the prison riots and the abduction of Itai Dzamara likely

⁴ www.dailynews.co.zw/articles/2015/03/27/gumbo-mutasa-court-tsvangirai

⁵ Ibid

⁶ <http://www.thestandard.co.zw/2014/02/09/unemployment-turns-graduates-vendors>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Beehner, L. 2007. The Effects of 'Youth Bulge on Civil Conflicts'. Available at www.cfr.org/world/effects-youth-bulge-civil-conflicts/p13093

⁹ <http://www.zimeye.com/breaking-news-uz-students-stage-demo-over-striking-lectures>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ <http://www.dailynews.co.zw/articles/2015/03/15/deadly-unrest-rocks-zim>

signaling the beginning of the end".¹²

Given the current state of affairs, the government should take seriously the predictions from analysts. On the political front, the political temperature in Zimbabwe is rising due to political bickering between and within political parties in the country. Factional fighting within the MDC-T in 2014 resulted in fist fights between senior party members and the subsequent splitting of the party. Serious factional tensions also broke out in ZANU PF in November 2014. They resulted in the expulsion of Vice President Joice Mujuru from both the party and government along with other senior government officials including Rugare Gumbo, Didymus Mutasa, Jabulani Sibanda, Nicholas Goche, Olivia Muchena, Kudakwashe Bhasikiti, Dzikamai Mavhaire, Ray Kaukonde and many others. Most recently, the expelled politicians have hinted forming their own political party called Zanu PF 'People First'. According to Rugare Gumbo:

"We are saying that we don't recognise the ZANU PF of 2014 because they are pretenders and have no legitimacy. They don't put people first. People are suffering, there is no rule of law and there is misery everywhere while they are living in their big houses"¹³.

The formation of a sprinter Zanu PF party seem to have increased power struggles within the party and if the situation continue as it is, some elements will within the party could resort to assassination, intimidation or torture of the members of the other group resulting in violent clashes which could generate into a civil strife.

Bad governance is another serious factor that could cause an Arab Spring style uprising in Zimbabwe. The manner in which decisions are made and implemented in Zimbabwe has so many shortcomings. Decisions are sometimes made without consulting the people, relevant ministries or departments. For instance, decisions to shift pay dates for civil servants is done unilaterally. The issue might appear minute, but it is tantamount to violation of labor laws and has the potential of causing protests which may lead to political instability. For instance, in March university lecturers went on strike over delays in February salaries and students responded by staging violent protests against the government. Arab Spring protests in Egypt, Libya, Algeria and Tunisia among other states began with youths especially university students and graduates. They started as mere protests and became 'war zones' which saw governments overthrown.

Human rights abuses and lack of rule of law were among the list of the causes of the Arab Spring conflicts. The government in Zimbabwe has a record of abusing its citizens through intimidation, torture and abduction of those who criticise the government. On 9 March 2015, a pro-democracy activist Itai Dzamara was abducted by

unknown men for allegedly planning to influence massive demonstration countrywide. The abducting individuals are suspected to be members of the secret service. Similar abductions took place in 2008 when activist Jestina Mukoko was abducted and severely tortured by government agents for allegedly planning to overthrow the government. The government should, if it is truly responsible, put an end to such activities as they may wreck havoc leading to civil unrest in the country. Rule of law is also lacking in the country. The government has a tendency of undermining the constitution in favor of *realpolitik* issues. For instance, the torture of citizens is serious violation of the country bill of rights as well as international human rights legal instruments.

More so, the emergence of a new political party in has the potential of raising political temperatures from both the ruling party and the opposition domain. The party was formed by former Zanu PF members who were expelled from the party in 2014. It was registered in January 2016 and named Zimbabwe People First (ZPF). The party is led by former vice president, Joice Mujuru. Zanu PF has a record of using torture, intimidation and other repressive measures to silence the opposition and their supporters if they threaten its survival. The formation of the Movement for Democratic Change in 2000 gave rise to politically motivated violence, intimidation and torture of party members and their supporters by state security agents, ZANU PF militia and their sympathisers. The reasons for the persecution of opposition members were the rising popularity of the party among the electorate thereby posing a threat to Zanu PF's political survival. Chances are high that the emergence of the new political party will trigger intense political violence in the upcoming elections scheduled for 2018.

The political climate in Zimbabwe will be worse if opposition parties form a grand coalition against Zanu PF. Political analysts, political activists and their equivalents have been calling for a united front by the opposition to deal with zanu pf in 2018. If that materializes Zanu PF could use force to suppress the united opposition. The force Zanu PF could use range from unleashing the state security machinery including soldiers, secret agents and police to intimidate and torture opposition parties' leaders and supporters. That is how the party has been surviving since the turn of the 21st century when MDC emerged as a popular party threatening the ruling party. Zanu PF could also enact repressive legislation designed to suppress the opposition and derail their chances of winning the upcoming elections. Following the rise of the MDC, a Zanu PF dominated parliament adopted the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and Access to Information and Privacy Act (AIPA) in 2002 to curtail freedom of assembly, information dissemination and other political rights of especially opposition members.

The laws were designed to legitimise and legalise the arrest and torture of opposition leaders and supporters for instituting rallies and other public meetings without

¹² Ibid

¹³ <http://nehanda.com/2015/04/09/squabble-over-zanu-pf-name>

approval by the police who were instructed to limit such approvals especially if they had to do with political campaigns and awareness issues by and for the benefit of those from the MDC. There is doubt that more or less of these tactics will be used to suppress ZPF or the grand coalition of the new party and other opposition players. If the opposition decide to retaliate or resist conflicts may erupt in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the challenges facing Zimbabwe since 2013 with a view to highlight the likelihood of the culmination of the political and economic crisis into a violent revolt against the government as people will be agitating for economic and political change. Rising levels of unemployment especially among the youth, poverty, political bickering between and within political parties, human rights abuses, poor service delivery and Zanu PF's serious misrule present a recipe for violent resistance from the people. The current (July 2016) state of affairs is fragile to the extent that it's only a matter of time before the situation gets out of control. Anti-government protests have been witnessed across the country as people agitate for political and economic change, but the government seems to be committed to crushing protests than addressing the political and economic crisis. Against this background, if the state of affairs continues unabated the likelihood of the occurrence of violent uprisings remains high.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Like war, internal strife is degenerative and counterproductive with regard to development in a country. The wave of revolutions in Arab countries in the wake of the Arab spring plunged the countries into political and socio-economic turmoil whose legacy is still haunting the likes of Egypt, Syria and Libya among others. In Libya, political instability that erupted in the wake of the uprising is still persisting. Zimbabwe should draw lessons from these states and avoid the occurrence of an uprising. Efforts should be made to prevent by all means, peaceful and policy oriented, to the eruption of civil unrest in the country. To remedy the current state of affairs, the government should consider the following policy options:

1. Formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies designed to improve the economy. The Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainability Socioeconomic Transformation (ZIMASSET) policy which the government formulated in 2013 is promising, but its implementation is not desirable. A lot needs to be done in term of monitoring the implementation of the policy to improve the economy.

Transforming the economy would mean reducing the rate of unemployment as closed companies would open and employ the unemployed. Poverty will also be reduced. In a nutshell, economic transformation will eliminate the likelihood of civil unrest.

2. The government should adhere to human rights law. Adherence to human rights law means the government will put an end to abduction, torture and intimidation of citizens.

3. Dissent voices should not be silenced by use of violence. In fact the government should address the concerns of the citizens to eliminate the possibility of violent resistance against the economic and political crisis.

4. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) should consider the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe as early warning signs of conflict that require urgent attention. In the event of the occurrence of violent revolt against the government in Zimbabwe, the whole Southern Africa's peace and security will be at stake.

Conflict of interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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