

**Michelle D. Gavin  
Adjunct Fellow for Africa  
Council on Foreign Relations**

**Testimony before the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee's  
Subcommittee on African Affairs  
"The Crisis in Zimbabwe and Prospects for Resolution"**

**July 15, 2008**

I am grateful to Chairman Feingold and Senator Isakson for this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on African Affairs, and I thank the Subcommittee for its consistent and thoughtful efforts on the issue of Zimbabwe.

The current state of play with regard to Zimbabwe is characterized by a desperate internal situation, a divided and ineffective set of international responses, and a troubling lack of clarity and consensus regarding the most promising way forward. The United States has limited options, but there are steps that can and should be taken to improve the prospects for a peaceful and swift resolution to the crisis.

A Manmade Disaster

This Subcommittee is more than familiar with Zimbabwe's recent history. By the late 1990s, economic mismanagement, official corruption, and the dominance of the ruling ZANU-PF party had stoked significant frustration within the country. A referendum on constitutional change that would have strengthened President Mugabe considerably catalyzed the forces opposed to the status quo and led to the emergence of a new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), with roots in the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions. When the electorate rejected the government-backed draft constitution in February 2000, the ruling party embarked on an increasingly costly campaign to shore up its power and guarantee its continued dominance.

Over the course of parliamentary elections in 2000 and 2005 and presidential elections in 2002, ZANU-PF continued a campaign of intimidation aimed at the MDC, its supporters, independent journalists, civil society activists, and ordinary Zimbabweans (especially the 700,000 Zimbabweans displaced in 2005's Operation Murambatsvina). The ruling party employed youth militia forces and "war veterans" in addition to using the regular security services to further its agenda. Senior security officers came to have a decisive role in all government decisions. Over time, the MDC was weakened to the point of splitting in 2005, with one faction led by Morgan Tsvangirai and another by Arthur Mutambara. Meanwhile, as the economy went into freefall, lucrative opportunities were provided to ZANU-PF elites to ensure their continued loyalty.

The most recent round of elections demonstrated just how deep dissatisfaction with the ruling party has become within Zimbabwe – and just how far the Mugabe regime is willing to go to cling to power. The extraordinary nature of the MDC's victories in the

March 29, 2008, parliamentary and presidential elections can only be understood when combined with a full appreciation for just how unfair the pre-election conditions were in the run-up to the balloting. Voting day itself was peaceful, but the campaigning period featured incidents of state harassment of opposition candidates, an extraordinarily strong state media bias in favor of the ruling party, manipulation of subsidized food to favor ZANU-PF, and widely publicized statements from senior security officials indicating that they would not recognize any victor but President Mugabe. Even with the deck stacked steeply against them, the official tallies, which the ZANU-PF-dominated electoral commission took five weeks to announce, revealed that opposition candidates fared extremely well with voters, winning a narrow majority in the House of Assembly and a plurality of the votes for President, though not enough to avoid the need for a runoff.

In the weeks before the runoff election, pre-election conditions went from problematic to terrifying. The Government of Zimbabwe banned many humanitarian and development NGOs from operating in the country and launched a vicious and far-reaching campaign of brutality and violence targeting MDC leaders and supporters as well as everyday citizens. Mugabe and members of his inner circle also made it clear that they would not respect any election result other than victory. In response, Tsvangirai withdrew from the June 27 sham exercise, which Mugabe won in a meaningless landslide.

Zimbabwe today is a country held hostage by an illegitimate government. As the international community fails to come to consensus on a strategy for resolving the crisis, civilians suffer in the midst of a man-made economic catastrophe characterized by stratospheric hyperinflation, massive unemployment, and food shortages so severe that the World Food Program anticipates that some five million Zimbabweans will be in need of food aid by September. This humanitarian crisis is all the more alarming in light of the Government of Zimbabwe's refusal to allow NGOs full access to populations in need. On top of this grim outlook, brutal political repression continues in Zimbabwe, as hardliners in ZANU-PF seek to continue punishing Zimbabweans for supporting democratic change and to decimate the organizational capacity of the opposition party and of independent civil society organizations. The ruling party continues to keep the press on a tight leash and takes deliberate steps to isolate and misinform the Zimbabwean people.

#### The International Response

The international community's response to these developments has been disjointed for years, and unfortunately it remains incoherent today. Over the course of the past eight years, the United States, EU, Australia and others condemned the repression in Zimbabwe and in many cases pursued targeted sanctions policies while still trying to provide humanitarian support to the population. In 2004, Zimbabwe withdrew from the Commonwealth rather than face expulsion. But many African states have long been reluctant to condemn Mugabe, and South African President Thabo Mbeki's efforts to mediate between the MDC and ZANU-PF on behalf of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have produced very little in the way of results. Mugabe has exploited these different reactions, and often characterizes the crisis in Zimbabwe as a new liberation struggle against neocolonial Western powers.

The events of the past several months have focused renewed international attention on Zimbabwe's crisis. Teams from the African Union, SADC, and the Pan-African Parliament all issued statements regarding the June 27 election indicating that it did not meet any appropriate standards. Several African governments, including those of Zambia, Botswana, Liberia, Senegal, Tanzania, and even Angola have, in one form or another, denounced the Zimbabwean government's actions. Powerful voices from within South Africa have spoken out as well. But at the recent AU summit, African leaders could come to consensus only around language expressing concern about the situation and encouraging negotiations aimed at forming a Government of National Unity.

Despite resistance from some African leaders, the G8 issued a strong statement on Zimbabwe on July 8, rejecting the legitimacy of the current Government of Zimbabwe, urging a negotiated resolution to the crisis that respects the results of the March 29 election, recommending the appointment of a UN envoy to report on the crisis and facilitate mediation, and pledging to take further action against those responsible for political violence. But last week's failed attempt to pass a United Nations Security Council resolution applying additional international pressure on those most responsible for Zimbabwe's suffering was a deeply disappointing illustration of the rifts that still exist in the international community with regard to Zimbabwe's crisis that dramatically slowed multilateral momentum. Though the resolution had nine votes of support, Russia and China both exercised their vetoes to defeat the resolution, and South Africa, Libya, and Vietnam voted against it.

The motives driving those who have acted to protect Zimbabwe's repressive and illegitimate government are varied, but they undoubtedly include the following concerns:

- A desire on the part of repressive governments to shield similarly autocratic and illegitimate regimes from international approbation,
- A fundamental discomfort with the prospect of condemning a leader of a historic liberation struggle,
- An unwillingness to publicly acknowledge the inadequacy of President Mbeki's mediation efforts, and
- A misguided belief that increased international pressure and an internationally supported political solution to the current crisis are mutually exclusive goals.

#### The Search for a Political Solution

While the international community is in disarray regarding the issue of sanctions, there is widespread international consensus on the desirability of negotiating the formation of some new government that includes elements of both ZANU-PF and the MDC.

However, the form such a government would take is unclear. All indicators suggest that ZANU-PF wishes to retain its power and simply co-opt the MDC. The opposition points out that it was the winner of the March 29 elections, which had some real legitimacy, and therefore should lead any new governing arrangement.

While the MDC has participated in talks (which currently appear to be stalled) on the modalities for such a negotiation, the party continues to insist that it will not actually

negotiate until political prisoners in Zimbabwe are released and the violent repression within the country stops. In short, the opposition does not wish to be forced to negotiate at gunpoint. Without the leverage of increased international pressure, however, this request for fundamental fairness is unlikely to be met. The MDC has also called for a new mediator from the AU to take the lead in facilitating negotiations, but despite having completely lost the confidence of one of the parties, President Mbeki is clearly reluctant to relinquish his exclusive role.

Whatever the specifics of the process, one should be wary of too many glib calls for a “Kenyan solution.” Some actors, including Robert Mugabe, will have to exit the political stage, and only an enforceable transitional arrangement that guides the country to genuinely free and fair elections within a specified timeframe makes sense. To view power sharing as an end in itself is to ignore the Zimbabwean people and to discount the decisive role that they should play in determining the future of governance in their country. The problem in Zimbabwe is not that Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai are locked in a struggle for executive power. The problem is that the Zimbabwean people have been denied their fundamental rights. Keeping the population rather than political elites at the forefront of the international debate can help to ensure that political solutions actually create space for more accountable governance in the future.

#### Next Steps

The hard truth is that this international landscape leaves the United States without many promising options, but this is not an argument for inaction or for empty gestures. A combination of public signaling, private communication, and concrete action can help to influence Zimbabwean and other African actors with more direct leverage than the United States possesses.

With regard to public messages, it is vital that the United States underscore that increased international pressure on the current, illegitimate Government of Zimbabwe is not intended to be an alternative to a political negotiation leading to a transitional government. Instead, increased pressure is needed to make such a negotiated process possible, by compelling ZANU-PF to abandon its current strategy of trying to beat the opposition into bending to its will. That’s not a negotiation; that’s political extortion, and for the international community to rely upon such a process is absurd.

As suggested above, the United States should make plain that the fundamental aim of its policy is to respect the dignity and rights of the Zimbabwean people and to improve their future prospects, not simply to condemn Robert Mugabe and his cronies. Certainly there is nothing wrong with speaking the truth about the appalling regime currently in power, and it is important to continue to note that this government has no claim to legitimacy. But efforts to encourage more effective African policies stumble when we overemphasize the role of individual political elites and underemphasize the point that the citizens of Zimbabwe, more than any political leader or group, deserve international support for their basic rights. They also deserve basic protections and assistance. The United States must continue to work with others to push for full humanitarian access in Zimbabwe, and this

issue should be raised in regional and international organizations constantly until it is resolved.

The United States should avoid focusing on the problems with the Zimbabwean presidency to the neglect of the parliament. Extremely worrying indications suggest that ZANU-PF will try to wrest the majority of seats in the House of Assembly back from the MDC before allowing the parliament to function at all. By threatening elected opposition officials or arresting them, ZANU-PF is again thwarting the democratically-expressed will of the citizens and doing further damage to the country's governing institutions. The United States must keep a close watch on parliamentary developments, and should be discussing these alarming trends regularly with African leaders to ensure that the integrity of the parliamentary election results remains on the international agenda.

Of course, the United States should act quickly and decisively to tighten targeted sanctions on individuals and institutions directing, perpetrating, or financing political violence and undermining democracy in Zimbabwe, but we must recognize that these actions, while they help to increase the costs of repression and lend themselves to satisfyingly tough announcements, cannot stand alone. Hard diplomatic work must accompany unilateral action to significantly broaden the community of countries taking meaningful steps to pressure the most problematic actors in Zimbabwe. That means that despite last week's disappointment in the Security Council, the United States should keep working at the highest levels to encourage international and regional bodies to take stronger action that can set the stage for genuine political negotiations.

President Mbeki cannot be effective as the sole mediator in talks between the MDC and ZANU-PF. Another mediator with a mandate from the African Union must be brought in to facilitate negotiations, and the United States should work closely with the AU to expedite the deployment of such an additional actor and to ensure that he has all of the resources required to succeed, including the capacity to call on members of the international community to provide vital guarantees and lay out clear consequences for bad faith. The United States can also work to ensure that international actors supporting an effective negotiation regularly consult with Zimbabwean civil society.

The United States should recognize that Zimbabwe's ruling party is not monolithic. Ultimately, actors within ZANU-PF who recognize that the country's economy must be stabilized and that this will not happen if the political status quo persists, can be persuaded to abandon the hardliners who aim to cling to power at all costs. Where the United States has access to some of these actors, it should not miss opportunities to encourage them to act on what they know to be true: Mugabe must go, and the era of unaccountable ZANU-PF-dominance must end.

In this vein, it is still useful to speak publicly and clearly about the recovery efforts that the United States and other members of the international community are prepared to support once sound governance mechanisms are in place in Zimbabwe. Moreover, the United States should continue efforts to establish sound reconstruction plans and to marshal international resources toward this end. By making sure that incentives for

supporting a change in governance are concrete rather than theoretical, the United States, working with others, can help to garner more ZANU-PF support for real reform, and to isolate those currently wielding the most influence within the party.

Ideally, the Zimbabwean people will be able to make final decisions about accountability for crimes committed to date. But the United States and others can support efforts to establish the basic facts of the matter by backing a United Nations investigation of the human rights abuses that have occurred thus far.

Finally, it is worth noting that the limits of U.S. leverage in this situation point toward the need for effective multilateral institutions and diplomatic credibility in order to address pressing foreign policy concerns. Not only does the United States have a clear interest in averting violent conflict and costly state collapse, it also has an obvious interest in promoting democracy and development in a region that should be an economic engine for the continent. None of these concerns will be addressed in Zimbabwe simply through unilateral action. Halting the decline of U.S. soft power, and doing the often-frustrating work of building consensus internationally, are indispensable building blocks of a policy response to Zimbabwe's crisis, and to others that may emerge in the future.