The downward spiral in Zimbabwe continues. Political stalemate, sanctions, unemployment, corruption and election violence have created a deadlock. It is the Zimbabwean people who suffer, not the politicians.

Better-off without a vote?

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S ELECTIONS LOOM over Zimbabwe in 2013, there is still no resolution to the political stalemate. The three political parties that in 2008 formed a Government of National Unity (gnu) have not achieved the reforms that would have prepared the country for elections and have only recently agreed on a constitution that they will put to a referendum in 2013.

The two MDC formations have lost the moral high ground, since people have come to understand that their MPs and ministers are enjoying the same perks as those in Zanu PF. Cases of corruption involving MDC councillors, and Prime Minister Tsvangirai’s sex scandals, have made matters worse. Zanu PF has strengthened its position among the voters since 2008, and recent opinion polls show they lead the MDC. Still, there are no certainties they will win, even though the MDC is not allowed to campaign at open rallies, since the police either refuse the party permission to hold any or interrupts those that they do hold. It has also dawned on Zanu PF that if they lose the election, they may not be allowed to refuse to leave office again. As a result, all three party leaders would prefer things to continue as they are and thus are likely to strike a deal and move into a continued or second gnu.

However, there is much apprehension once one begins to scratch below the surface and ask about the forthcoming elections. There is not one person I have spoken to that is not dreading the elections and the violence they believe it will bring. Youth bases are already being visibly established in local communities around the country and it is understood that some war veteran associations are already mobilising for the elections. It was from these bases that much of the election violence in 2008 was carried out. Their presence strikes fear into individuals and communities and this may make it possible for political parties to “harvest” the fear created in 2008 and not necessarily resort to overt violence – “toy-toying” may be enough. However, Zanu PF will not risk losing the new elections and will make sure everything is in place beforehand. With unemployment and poverty still high, especially among the youth, generating violence is very cheap. As a member of the MDC put it, “A scud (local beer) costs fifty cents, so twenty dollars can go a long way.”

THIS LEAVES THE COUNTRY in a very awkward situation in that the political parties, civil society, the business community and ordinary people do not want elections. This prompts the question of whether elections are actually the way out of this stalemate,
especially if they simply act as a catalyst for violence, which, in any case, simply reproduces the status quo. One of the problems with the current governing arrangement is that because it is not internationally supported, the MDC has been thrust into the GNU that has loaded it with responsibilities, but given it absolutely no power or resources (neither from the Zimbabwean state nor the international community) to deliver on those responsibilities. This has become a poisoned chalice for the MDC and has not created a platform to initiate the necessary reforms.

Conversely, if elections do go ahead and the MDC wins, and is in fact allowed to take control of the state, there is every possibility it would behave exactly like Zanu PF – simply because it can. The Imperial Presidency in Zimbabwe means the president is not accountable to anyone and can do whatever he/she wants. Power is concentrated in the office of the presidency and even President Mugabe has recently said that “parliament is merely a decoration.” The reality is that the executive negotiates legislation, and parliament simply rubber stamps it. Power needs to be diffused from this imperial office and shared with the parliament, senate and judiciary. It also needs to be decentralised by allowing the provincial state apparatus to exercise some power at the local level.

**The Economy Has Improved** since the lows of 2003 and 2008 but high levels of unemployment persist. A compradore class has emerged in Zimbabwe, where certain individuals, without any economic bases, are operating as brokers between the minerals industry and international buyers. However, they do not reinvest the profits to create jobs or contribute to productive economic growth, but are the merchants of capital flight, and focus on luxury consumption – flashy cars, clothes and hotels. These compradores are closely linked to the illegal mining of diamonds: it is claimed that during the last two years, over US $2 billion dollars’ worth of diamonds have been sold through them. None of these profits passed through the ministry of finance or the Zimbabwean treasury. The new draft constitution of January 2013 addresses some of these issues, but the nature of informal politics and power in Zimbabwe may circumvent this.

**The Land Reform** programme has had mixed results. Many of the lucrative farms have been handed out to Zanu PF party associates, who often have hired farm managers (including former farmers whose farms were redistributed by the state) to run the farms, and they are operating somewhat successfully. The poor landless Zimbabweans who were resettled on farms have also engaged in farming with varying results: some have been successful, some are breaking even and some have failed completely. These farmers are also using a different farming model – not large-scale commercial farming, but smallholder farming which has also changed the types of crops and farming inputs. Production has increased from 2003, but is still far less than the pre-2000 levels and there are many farms that are lying in waste. That said, there is a new order in Zimbabwe and many of the changes made with regard to land reform are irreversible. This demands new and creative ways of approaching the land issue and its ownership. I certainly cannot see an MDC government stripping resettled peasant farmers of their land and handing it over to the former white farmers. This would amount to political suicide and the MDC would never live down the accusation of being a “British Puppet.”