



Situation Report

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Fiddling While Zimbabwe Burns

Introduction

The death on 20 September 2003 of eighty-one-year-old Vice President Simon Vengesayi Muzenda- staunch ally of Mugabe and veteran nationalist- has intensified the battle about who will succeed President Robert Mugabe. It has emerged that the Vice President's death has prompted the various factions in the ruling party to begin vying with each other for the vacant second-vice-presidential post. It is widely believed that the appointment of the new Vice President will indicate who Mugabe prefers as his successor in the party and the government. It is possible that Muzenda's death has meant that Mugabe in particular and ZANU PF in general have had to consider seriously the question of succession sooner than expected - a situation that "could prematurely end the heated succession debate by giving glimpses into the candidate President Mugabe would want to occupy the most powerful office when he retires."¹ More ominous for the ruling party is the fact that Muzenda's death has left a power vacuum in the deeply divided and province of Masvingo, where the veteran politician acted as a stabilising force, ensuring that infighting did not get out of hand. A permanent split in this key province would inevitably result in serious costs to the governing party. Muzenda's death has increased the likelihood of the party splitting in this important province, as the two competing factions contest the vacant leadership of Masvingo.

Judging by recent statements by Mugabe which indicate his intention to retire, many observers speculate that the President- aged 79 and the ruler of Zimbabwe for 23 years- plans to step down from office well before his six-year term ends in 2008.² However, the aging Head of State is an astute political strategist and will act very cautiously when he appoints a new Vice President because he will not want to reveal who his chosen successor is too early in the game, as this could expose the successor to challenges from other rivals within the ruling party. Some analysts have concluded that a reluctance to reveal his choice of successor and contradict his call for open debate on the succession issue means that the President will not fill the vacant vice-presidential post too soon. Fortunately for President Mugabe, the constitution places no obligation on him to appoint a Vice President to replace the late Simon Muzenda.

Even though "the constitutional provision may yet prove a much-needed safety valve for Mugabe to stave off a fierce behind-the-scenes succession battle within the ruling party, and one that has taken on an ethnic hue",³ conjecture still surrounds the question of who the top contenders are in the battle to fill the Vice President's position and, ultimately, to succeed President Mugabe.

The succession stakes

Since the death of Vice President Muzenda, John Nkomo (ZANU PF's National Chairman and Minister of Special Affairs), who now ranks third after President Mugabe and Vice President Joseph Msika, has been acting as Vice President. Although John Nkomo would appear to be next in line for the vice presidency, the National Unity Accord signed between formerly hostile national liberation movements ZANU PF and PF ZAPU in 1987 prevents Nkomo from taking the vice presidency, since the former PF ZAPU already has a representative on the presidium in the form of Msika. Moreover, when the two belligerents signed the National Unity Accord in the wake of the protracted low-intensity civil war in Zimbabwe, a convention emerged that the two Vice Presidents should come from the two wings of the party. This was seen as a means of creating a political balance of power between the Shona and Ndebele groups, from which ZANU PF and PF ZAPU derived, respectively, most of their support.

Zimbabwe's Unity Accord, described by some as an agreement which saw the assimilation of the "vanquished" into ZANU PF, resulted in the late PF ZAPU leader, Joshua Nkomo occupying the vice presidency alongside Mugabe's long-time lieutenant, Muzenda.⁴ In fact, the death of Joshua Nkomo in 1999 did not derail the 1987 convention as his deputy from the former PF ZAPU, Joseph Msika, replaced him as the party and government's second vice-president.

However, Muzenda's death, coming as it has in the thick of intense jostling among ZANU PF stalwarts, has thrown up several obstacles in the race to fill posts in the executive office. Largely propelled by Mugabe's decision to allow for an intra-party succession debate, ZANU PF is now the stage of intense elbowing, with factions competing with one another for power and influence, sometimes split along ethno-linguistic and provincial lines.⁵

ZANU PF's internal rifts

The dominant faction within ZANU PF is, of course, that currently led by President Robert Mugabe. It draws its core following from the Zezuru ethno-linguistic group, one of the principal Chishona-speaking groups. Other leaders of this group include political heavyweights such as retired Lieutenant-General Tapfumanei Solomon Mujuru (*nom de guerre*: Rex Nhongo) who is considered by many to be a potential kingmaker because of his extensive connections in the political, security and commercial sectors of Zimbabwe. Though often underestimated because of his ability to avoid the limelight, Mujuru is a force to be reckoned with. Another important player in the Zezuru faction is Dr Sydney Sekeramayi, who currently holds the post of Minister of Defence in the Cabinet. In fact, Sekeramayi is seen by some as a strong presidential contender partly because of his powerful voice in ZANU PF's upper echelons, but mainly because of his strong connection to Mujuru. Most analysts predict that the latter would support Sekeramayi in a race for succession to the presidency.

However, for many in the ZANU PF's Zezuru alliance, the Karanga group (yet another of the Chishona ethno-linguistic groups) represents a threatening force. This is particularly true of one of the Karanga factions (there are two such factions), that led by Dr Eddison Zvobgo, who currently faces a ZANU PF disciplinary hearing for allegedly de-campaigning President Robert Mugabe in the March 2002 presidential election.⁶ Within this faction, retired Air Marshal Josiah Tungamirai, who challenged the late Vice President Muzenda for the nomination of the Gutu North constituency during the 1995 election, most closely supports Zvobgo. The death of Muzenda, who helped to quell division in the fractious Karanga group and Masvingo province, has meant that the hard fought power struggles in this volatile province are set to re-ignite unless the vacuum left by Muzenda in Masvingo is filled quickly.

In this regard, there is widespread speculation that the sixty-year-old commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Force (ZDF), General Vitalis Zvinavashe, who was a senior member of the late Vice President's camp, could retire in December this year to concentrate on his new political career as the leader of the divided Masvingo province. There are, however, doubts about whether Zvinavashe has what it takes to unify ZANU PF in the province and dislodge the opposition MDC from Masvingo urban.⁷ Although it is President Mugabe's desire to have his ally at the hub of politics in Masvingo, highly placed sources within ZANU PF say Zvinavashe would be likely to meet stiff resistance from the faction led by Zvobgo and Tungamirai.

The other Karanga faction, closely aligned with Mugabe's Zezuru group, was led by the late Vice President Simon Muzenda and his protégé and distant cousin Josaya Hungwe- the Governor of Masvingo. Muzenda's death has left a void in this group, which relied heavily on the political clout of the deceased veteran strategist. Also a key member of the Muzenda-Karanga group is Emmerson Mnangagwa, who is thought to be a key contender for presidential succession because of his track record as Security Minister and the high esteem in which President Mugabe holds him. However, should Mugabe choose Mnangagwa (known in Zimbabwe as "the son of God" because of his close relationship to Mugabe) the ruling party's delicate pecking order could be destabilised because Mnangagwa would become John Nkomo's senior, when Nkomo defeated Mnangagwa in the race for the chairmanship during the party's congress in 1999.⁸

Over the years the late Muzenda and Zvobgo clashed over the leadership of the southern province of Masvingo. Muzenda was said to be determined to ensure that Mnangagwa took over his place when he retired from the vice-presidential seat.⁹ This was primarily because Mnangagwa's succession would keep long-time rival Zvobgo out of the political center and simultaneously destroy the latter's chances of succeeding Mugabe. During a speech at the wake at Muzenda's home in rural Gutu, Mugabe indicated that he was acutely aware of the implications for the ruling party of a permanent split in Masvingo, when he revealed that "his party's political support could fall apart and lose its age-old stranglehold in the province to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) because of Muzenda's death". "Why should we let the symbol of our nationhood, the Great Zimbabwe, slip from our grip?" he pleaded with mourners gathered to pay their last respects to his deputy.¹⁰ In fact, this scenario would easily become a reality if Zvobgo and members of his faction were to play "the high stakes" game once more and try to take advantage of the void created by Muzenda's death to reclaim their dominance of the province.

The different ZANU PF factions who are loosely split along ethno-linguistic lines are graphically represented in Figure 1:

Fig. 1. ZANU PF factions¹¹



Mugabe's great escape

Most analysts agree that should Mugabe decide to step down he would seek an exit strategy that would allow him to retire reasonably soon without fear of prosecution and that would provide him with protection from revenge by some of the enemies that he has made over the

past two decades. This exit strategy ideally would require a successor to the presidential seat whom Mugabe can trust and who has a relatively constant history of loyalty to him. The successor would also have to have the capacity to provide the protection that Mugabe requires and would have to be considered politically astute enough to remain in power long after Mugabe has left the stage. Finally, this successor would preferably come from the dominant Zezuru ethnic group, as ethno-linguistic considerations seem to play an important part in Zimbabwean politics. Currently, there seem to be two ZANU PF strong men who lead the pack in the race to succeed Mugabe: Speaker of Parliament Emmerson Mnangagwa and Defence Minister Sydney Sekeramayi.

The potential successor who possesses most of these qualities, and who has over the years become a close confidant to Mugabe is, undoubtedly, Emmerson Mnangagwa. However, the fact that he is not a Zezuru could seriously affect his chances. This is because should he succeed Mugabe to the presidency, this would shift the balance of power within the ZANU PF in favour of the Muzenda-Karanga group, particularly if we consider that yet another member of this group, Stan Mudenge, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs is considered a most likely candidate to fill the post of Vice President. The fact that the current commander of the ZDF, General Vitalis Zvinvashe, is also a Karanga should further indicate why such an outcome would be unacceptable to certain elements in ZANU PF. The Zezuru camp would essentially find itself excluded from the executive presidency for the first time since independence.

The Zezuru camp led by Mujuru would much prefer to see its own man, Sidney Sekeramayi, take the top spot in any post-Mugabe government, as this would act as a counterbalance to the growing strength of the Muzenda Karanga group. It is widely believed that the faction led by Mujuru may succeed in placing its man in the office of the President, since Mujuru is believed to enjoy the important support of the much-feared Central Intelligence Organisation and the ZDF, through his close association with members of these institutions, particularly current Air Force Commander and former Commander of the notorious 5th Brigade, Air Marshal Perence Shiri. The opposition that Mnangagwa's is expected to encounter from within the Karanga group led by Zvobgo may further reduce his chances.¹²

Meanwhile there have been contradictory reports on the state of the relationship between the MDC and ZANU PF and how far the informal 'behind-the-scenes' talks have gone in bridging the political divide that separates both parties. To most observers, a negotiated settlement between the two main political parties presents the best way of moving Zimbabwe on from the stalemate in which it currently finds itself. As pointed out by the *International Crisis Group*, "the overwhelming priority must be to get talks started in order to avert a further meltdown in Zimbabwe".¹³ Indeed, negotiations are the only way out of the impasse that otherwise promises to become increasingly violent and destructive. Moreover, recent reconciliatory comments made by Mugabe- particularly his remark at the burial of Vice President Muzenda- seem to indicate that the Zimbabwean President may be ready for talks with the MDC, whose leadership he referred to as "fellow sons of the soil together".

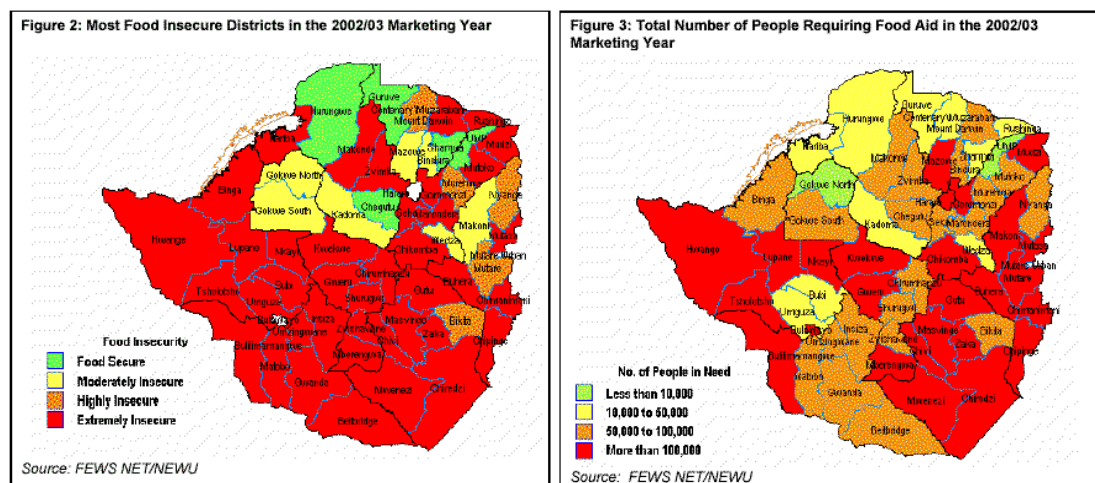
However, several of ZANU PF's internal dynamics discussed above may stand in the way of a negotiated change. Intra-party factionalism and competition for leadership, as well as the need for party reform may hamper any attempts at a meaningful dialogue with the MDC. In fact, until ZANU PF's internal issues are addressed, the likelihood for real change through negotiation is, at best, slim and realistically improbable. Therefore, if the leaders of ZANU PF are truly concerned about extricating their country from the political and economic quagmire and not solely concerned with amassing personal power and wealth, they must act to resolve the leadership question swiftly so that they can begin wholehearted negotiations with the opposition.

While the politicians fiddle around as the flames that engulf Zimbabwe grow in intensity, the glaring reality of Zimbabwe's economic collapse is there for all to see. The economic gains and expanding social services of the 1980s have been thrown into reverse. According to Zimbabwean economist John Robertson, the economy has shrunk by over 19% over the past year, and the gulf widens daily between the official exchange rate (Zim \$860 to US \$1*) and the parallel market (Zim \$5,800 to US \$1*).¹⁴ The effect of these factors together with the

acceleration of company closures, and the worsening of countrywide fuel shortages clearly indicate that Zimbabwe's economy is now in "a shambolic state from which recovery will be arduous if not impossible. Inflation is high enough (about 450%) to have no real meaning. The Reserve Bank cannot keep up with the volume of cash as a result of price hikes. Bread sells for more than Zim \$1000 a loaf, and beef and maize for Zim \$3000 and Zim \$300 a kilo respectively. When available, fuel sells on the black-market for Zim \$1200 to Zim \$1500 a litre."¹⁵

The Zimbabwean government's ill-executed agrarian reform programme has as yet been unable to create a new self-sufficient class of successful small-scale farmers to fill the vacuum left by evicted white farmers. The controversial land grab has also resulted in the undermining of commercial farming in the country, which- in the past- was the bedrock of the economy. Production estimates for key crops for 2004 are forecast to be sharply down, which has also affected Zimbabwe's formerly robust agro-manufacturing industry. The prevailing drought conditions in Zimbabwe forecasted to endure well into the next agricultural season, together with the negative effects of the land redistribution programme, have resulted in a severe food crisis. What is more, the government's search for new financiers has failed to be a match for frozen donor aid and lost foreign exchange. The maps in Figure 2 (below) are graphic representations of the food security situation in Zimbabwe.

Figure 2: Zimbabwe's food-security situation and number of people requiring food aid in 2002/ 2003¹⁶



It is almost certain that the rapid decline of Zimbabwe's economic fortunes will motivate and push progressive forces within the governing party to pursue an exit strategy for the aging Zimbabwean president. In a rare media interview, Zvinvashe revealed the extent of the damage done to business interests in the country. He told the Harare weekly *Business Tribune* (owned by a Mnangagwa ally, Mutumwa Mawere) that Zimbabwe's economic crisis was caused by bad policies and recommended that a national task force be set up to address what he described as an "emergency situation".

Observers can look forward to an eventful party congress in Masvingo in December this year, as the inner ZANU PF contest for the succession to the presidency intensifies. Faced with the collapse of the economy and Mugabe's alleged imminent departure from power, top ZANU PF officials, who have a great personal interest in the Zimbabwean economy, may have begun to reconsider their allegiance to the veteran president. In fact, should Mnangagwa succeed in his plans to take the presidency, the Zezuru camp will find itself excluded from executive office for the first time since independence, a prospect destined to lead not to peace and stability but to more political conflict. While factionalism within ZANU PF is undoubtedly weakening the party, could it lead to its disintegration in the future? And would this create space for the MDC to win the next elections? Most observers consider this a highly unlikely scenario, a consequence of strong ideological differences and lack of creativity within the movement, coupled with Mugabe's relentless undermining of all political parties and civil society organisations opposed to his rule.

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- ¹ The Financial Gazette, ZANU PF in Succession quandary, 25 /09/ 2003.
- ² Sunday Times (Johannesburg), 27 /04/ 2003. President Robert Mugabe was quoted as saying, “ We are getting to a stage where we shall say fine, we settled this matter and people can retire.”
- ³ The Mirror, Succession race hots up, 23 /09/ 2003.
- ⁴ Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, Talks about Talks or a mere waste of time. Discussion Paper, May 2003.
- ⁵ South Scan, Zanu elite bows to Mnangagwa as he edges ahead. V18/20 3 October 2003. “The committee formed by some senior ZANU-PF members to discuss the issue of the succession was disbanded as it was reported to have caused serious division in the party.” Some political analysts see the dissolution of the committee as an attempt by Mugabe to manage the succession debate more closely, particularly since the death of Muzenda.
- ⁶ Zimbabwe Standard, Mzee death: Hungwe faction in disarray, 05/10/2003.
- ⁷ The Financial Gazette, ZANU PF in succession quandary, 25/09/2003.
- ⁸ Business Day (Johannesburg), Succession Struggle coming to a head. 30/09/2003.
- ⁹ According to a south Scan report (v18/20 3 October 03), “events at the wake held at the late Vice President’s Simon Muzenda’s rural home last week showed that Mnangagwa was already being received by the party faithful as the unofficial head of state.
- ¹⁰ Zimbabwe Standard, Mzee death: Hungwe faction in disarray, 05/10/2003.
- ¹¹ * Indicates the two front runners in the Zanu PF succession debate
- ¹² Chris Maroleng, Future power plays in Zimbabwe. ISS Situation Report, 07/03/2002.
- ¹³ ICG Africa Briefing, Decision Time in Zimbabwe, 8 July 2003, p. 7.
- ¹⁴ Op cit, Chris Maroleng, Zimbabwe: Smoke screens and mirrors, ISS Situation Report. 07/02/03. *Exchange rate up dated as at 07/10/2003 09h: 50.
- ¹⁵ Greg Mills, Business Day (Johannesburg), Taking stock of quiet diplomacy, 02/10/03.
<http://www.bday.co.za/bday/content/direct/1,3523,1445421-6096-0,00.html>
- ¹⁶ Source: FEWS NET.