



**Zimbabwe's Run-off: A chance for change or a costly detour?**

Opinion piece by Christopher Gevers

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Following weeks of uncertainty regarding the outcome of Zimbabwe's Presidential election, there is now both an official result as well as a date fixed for the second round. The final result saw Tsvangirai edge ahead of the incumbent Mugabe by 47% to 43%, but not with the outright majority required to avoid a second round. The run-off is now scheduled to take place on 27 June 2008. In the intervening period, the economy has further deteriorated and disturbing reports of politically motivated violence have emerged amidst the deployment of security forces throughout the country. Given these prevailing conditions, the question must be asked: Can the country afford the cost – both economic and human – of another round of elections? Put differently, how does the upcoming electoral round fare in a cost-benefit analysis?

Assessing the immediate economic cost of the second round is more easily done than assessing its long-term effect on the economy. Various figures have been bandied about in this regard, however due to the unprecedented currency fluctuations the actual monetary figure is near impossible to approximate. What is clear is that it is likely to have a serious impact on the country's already depleted reserves. In the long-term, this election was intended to address the crisis of legitimacy that has left the country isolated from the international community and its lending facilities and precipitated unprecedented economic collapse. Therefore, should the end result not address the issue of legitimacy, the actual long-term cost to the economy – and by extension the citizenry of Zimbabwe – would be much higher. However one looks at it, the economic costs of the run-off are likely to be higher than the country can reasonably afford.

Calculating the human cost of a run-off is a much more complex exercise. Given the prevailing climate of violence and insecurity, and the build up in the informal and formal

security sectors, it is not unreasonable to suggest that violence may well be a feature of the next round of elections. To what extent this is the case depends largely on the incumbent Zanu-PF who has traditionally held a monopoly on organized violence, through the security sector and informal party militias. Contemplating what is at stake for the former ruling party and its leadership, and its relative chances of winning an election legitimately, is instructive in this regard.

From the outset it is apparent that this is a zero-sum game for Mugabe and, perhaps more pertinently, the individuals in Zanu-PF's leadership who are heavily invested in maintaining the party's hold on power. Having lost control of Parliament, and with the ultimate control of the Senate resting on Presidentially-appointed office bearers, Zanu-PF has to win this election to maintain its hold on power.

However, it is difficult to see how Zanu-PF can expect to win an election legitimately. Mugabe will have to recover from losing the first round and address the fact that the Arthur Mutambara faction of the MDC has thrown its weight behind Tsvangirai, with Simba Makoni likely to follow. Mugabe will have to do so without the level of state resources that were available to 'influence' voters in the first round and in a climate of increasing socio-economic hardship, a factor that undoubtedly counted against him in that round. Finally, the psychological importance of Zanu-PF losing its first election since independence cannot be underestimated in terms of breaking the dominance of its liberation discourse.

Against these odds, and given what is at stake, it seems almost certain that violence will be a seminal if not central electoral strategy for the incumbent party. To a very real extent this has already begun, the current barrage of violence targeting opposition supporters and focused in areas that supported Tsvangirai in the first round, beyond being retaliatory and intimidating, has been viewed by analysts as an attempt to dislocate Tsvangirai followers from their designated electoral wards in order to disenfranchise them in the second round. It is very likely that the human cost of a second round of elections will be high.

As far as the benefits of continuing to a second round are concerned, attempting to quantify these is similarly complex. In principle it is part of the legitimate electoral

process which should be respected as a means for facilitating the expression of the democratic right of the people of Zimbabwe. However, this is not absolute. This benefit is not realized if the expression of this right is perverted by violence and intimidation, or stolen in the event that such violence serves to disenfranchise portions of the populace. Similarly, it is not an election for elections sake, and must realize its purpose which is to result in the democratically elected government assuming power.

Unfortunately, the current political climate as well as recent electoral history, particularly the circumstances surrounding the releasing of results from the first round, suggest that it is by no means a given that whomever wins the run-off will be able to assume power and form a de facto government. The country may well end up in the same situation that many thought it was in immediately after the first round when it appeared that Morgan Tsvangirai had won the election outright, with a democratically elected leader who has no clear means of wresting power from a recalcitrant incumbent party. This is particularly difficult in Zimbabwe where power is centralized in the ruling party, not only political power but also control over the state's security forces.

This is why many believe that, even with a legitimate electoral process, any transition in government following 28 years of post-liberation dominance by one party would have to include some form of a negotiated settlement that addresses the concerns of those who stand to lose the most and have the potential to scuttle the transition.

Ultimately, the actual costs and benefits of the upcoming elections will only become apparent as the process unfolds. Suffice to say that there are many concerns regarding the run-off and whether it will manage to alter the course of the country's ailing economic, political and social fortunes. Moreover, unless more is done to bring together the opposition and specifically Morgan Tsvangirai, who appears certain to be part of the country's next political leadership, and key members of the current political and military structures, who realistically must accede to any change in that leadership, there is a good chance that the upcoming run-off will be a costly and bloody detour that brings the country back to the current political impasse.

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