

Zimbabwe

Divide and conquer

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Robert Mugabe expects to stay in office

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ROBERT MUGABE, Zimbabwe's ageing president, celebrated his official birthday at the weekend. The 84-year-old threw a party at Beitbridge, on the border with South Africa, and launched his campaign for a sixth term in office. He has ruled for nearly three decades and expects to win re-election in a general and presidential election in March. He rehearsed his usual stump speech, hurling abuse at anyone who dares to stand up to him (he called one opposition leader, Simba Makoni, a "prostitute" and a puffed up frog) and blaming outsiders—notably George Bush and Britain's Gordon Brown—for his country's ever more miserable economic collapse.

Even he can no longer deny that Zimbabwe's economy is in a dreadful state. Statistics in the country hardly capture the awfulness of daily life. Annual inflation is said to be some 100,000%; unemployment is about 80%; there is a chronic lack of fuel and food. For ordinary people this means scratching a living through barter, relying on remittances from as many as 3m Zimbabweans living abroad (mostly in South Africa, Botswana and Britain), or growing maize and vegetables for sale, even on pitifully small plots on the sides of roads in city centres. Partly as a result of AIDS, life expectancy has plummeted in the country.

The general economic malaise is a result of Mr Mugabe's own misrule. The seizure of commercial farms and the collapse of the rule of law in Zimbabwe have led to a dramatic slump in agricultural output, a sharp contraction in industry and a flight of investors. The "economic sanctions" which he blames—in fact targeted travel sanctions on a hundred plus of Zimbabwe's elite—have not caused the country's disaster.

Yet Mr Mugabe is still confident of winning. Circumstances may suggest he should not be. A former finance minister,

Mr Makoni, who has a long history in Mr Mugabe's ruling ZANU-PF, is running against the president. Although Mr Makoni has been expelled from the party, he is expected to appeal to voters who are fed-up with Mr Mugabe's misrule but who are unwilling to plump for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) which, confusingly, has itself split in recent years.

Youngish, personable, well-educated, and a competent administrator and businessman, he is seen as a compromise candidate whom Zimbabweans could unite around and whom foreign governments, such as South Africa's, would welcome. Perhaps, most important, Mr Makoni could try to persuade heavy-hitters in ZANU-PF, such as Solomon Mujuru, a former head of the army who has previously tussled with the president, either to jump ship and support the rival candidacy, or at least to restrain Mr Mugabe's efforts to rig the results at the polls.

There is no evidence of this happening. Mr Makoni, if he were to make a difference, would have to appeal to large numbers of rural voters in the centre and north of the country, who traditionally throw their support behind the ruling party. For the past decade or so, the opposition MDC has anyway been able to win urban seats (especially in Harare, the capital, and Bulawayo, the second city) and much of the south-west of the country, where Ndebele people have long opposed Mr Mugabe's rule.

But Mr Makoni will be constrained by the usual difficulties that face the opposition: the lack of an effective organisation in those parts of the country where ZANU-PF is strongest; the lack of a free media, especially the absence of a daily newspaper where criticism of Mr Mugabe may be aired; and the lack of radio stations which can be heard in rural areas. Nor does it help that the vast majority of Zimbabweans who have left the country are likely to be opposition supporters, who will therefore not be able to vote. And even if some combination of Mr Makoni and the opposition MDC were able to get more opposition supporters to polling stations, there remains the obvious risk that the results—as before—will be rigged in favour of Mr Mugabe.

Perhaps the reason that Mr Mugabe looked so confident this weekend is that he believes the opposition—which was powerful at recent elections because it was united behind a single candidate—is now fractured between Mr Makoni (who has the support of one faction of the MDC) and the part of the MDC led by Morgan Tsvangirai, plus an independent candidate, Langton Towungana. On Monday February 25th Mr Makoni confirmed that he has no plans to unite with Mr Tsvangirai, saying that he is, instead, "in coalition with the people of Zimbabwe". The risk for Zimbabwe is that Mr Mugabe may find it easier to hold onto office because his rivals are divided among themselves.