



Q&A

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Revolt and Repression in Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwean government's decision to hike fuel prices has sparked fierce opposition. In this Q&A, Crisis Group's Senior Consultant Piers Pigou explains how economic hardship is driving ordinary citizens to unprecedented acts of resistance.

What triggered this explosion of unrest?

On 12 January, in response to persistent fuel shortages compounded by manipulation and mismanagement of a currency crisis, President Emmerson Mnangagwa announced a fuel price hike of over 200 per cent to \$3.31 per litre – making the country's petrol price the highest in the world. It is unclear how this move would address the shortages, outside of pricing fuel out of the reach of many; already, the knock-on effects of transport and commodity price increases are adding evident stress to ordinary Zimbabweans' lives.

The massive rise sparked a general strike, along with widespread protests, which in many areas was characterised by violence and considerable destruction of property. Those behind the strike did not call for demonstrations, but thousands, especially young people, took to the streets, with many looting shops and burning cars or buildings. Protests were concentrated in and around the main opposition strongholds, the capital Harare and Bulawayo, but also appeared in cities elsewhere across the country. In turn the government ordered a vicious clampdown – deploying soldiers as well as police.

At the end of the second day of protests on 15 January, Zimbabwe's Doctors for Human Rights released a statement saying "hundreds shot, tens estimated dead in rampant rights

violations across Zimbabwe". Their assessment included reports of 107 patients treated for gunshot and blunt trauma wounds. For days after that, it was hard to obtain updated casualty figures. The government blocked internet services, both at the outset of the unrest and again on 18 January, severely disrupting the flow of information and contributing to widespread confusion.

On 18 January, the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum was able to publish consolidated statistics counting 844 human rights violations during the general strike. These numbers include: at least twelve killings; at least 78 gunshot injuries; at least 242 cases of assault, torture or inhumane and degrading treatment, including dog bites; 466 arbitrary arrests and detentions; and many displacements (with the number being verified). Other violations are invasion of privacy, obstruction of movement, and limitation of media freedoms and access to information.

Protesters have also engaged in intimidation, violence, vandalism and looting. The government confirmed that they stoned one police officer to death; there are several unconfirmed reports of fatalities and injuries among the security forces. The extent of the property damage has yet to be determined, though human rights groups have documented at least 46 instances. The country's main cities are at a standstill.

The government and media have accused the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), trade unions and civil society groups backed by foreign funders (the U.S. and Germany were named) of orchestrating the protests as part of a campaign to undermine the government and elevate the MDC's leader, Nelson Chamisa, into office. Such accusations are par for the course when the government faces protests; based on past experience, it seems unlikely it will supply compelling evidence to support these claims.

Did the unrest come out of the blue?

Anger at the government has been building for some time. On my last visit to the capital Harare in December 2018, the country's economic woes were plain to see. Prices in shops were soaring, retailers were closing down and queues for petrol were lengthening as the country struggled to juggle payments for competing import priorities. Control over the country's fuel supply is in the hands of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), and the huge financial benefits that come with it are reportedly causing factional rivalry. There is widespread public speculation that the shortages are caused by inter-elite squabbles or even deliberately engineered.

The price hike thus ignited the already dry tinder on the ground. On 13 January, one day after the announcement, civil society groups backed a call by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions for a three-day "stayaway", or general strike.

Underlying the skyrocketing prices of fuel, food and other goods is a currency crisis that has been worsening through much of 2018. In 2009, facing similar hyper-inflation, the government abandoned the national currency, and switched the economy over completely to the U.S. dollar. After an election in 2013 in which it ran on a platform of job creation and economic recovery, the ZANU-PF government demonstrated astonishing levels of financial delinquency. It "financed" its own systematic over-expenditure with massive borrowing. Domestic debt, which stood at just \$442 million

in 2013, surged to \$10.5 billion by February 2018 and has climbed further over the last year. In 2016, as more and more dollars drained out of the economy, the government introduced a new "bond note" currency, nominally at parity with the dollar, in an attempt to make up for cash shortages, as well as direct electronic payments into bank accounts for goods and services. These payments included the salaries of civil servants, the last bastion of formal employment. It was the equivalent of printing money over and above the value of the reserves in the central bank.

The government continues to claim parity between the bond note, electronic balances and the dollar. With most financial transactions being cashless, this mythology of official parity was maintained, although the bond notes and electronic reserves were trading at a lower rate. But both the latter quasi-currencies have rapidly depreciated since the government introduced fiscal and monetary reforms in October, leading prices for goods and services to spike across the board. The runaway inflation in turn has prompted panic buying and widespread shortages of critical goods such as medicines. It has cut the value of ordinary citizens' earnings and savings by more than half, further impoverishing an already struggling populace.

In the weeks following the fiscal reforms, as purchasing power evaporated, the entire public-sector work force began organising to confront the government. Since early December, Zimbabwean doctors have been at loggerheads with

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the government, crippling central parts of an already degraded health care system. On 8 January, the Apex Council, an umbrella body representing civil servants, issued the government the statutory two-week notice that it would call a general strike to protest the government's refusal to pay civil servants in hard currency, namely U.S. dollars.

Is there precedent for this level of violence accompanying protests in Zimbabwe?

The scale of violence is the worst the country has witnessed in some time. Before 1 August 2018, when the military shot dead six civilians in Harare, Zimbabwe's security forces did not use live ammunition in crowd control. Now they seem to rely on it.

In another escalation, the government has deployed the military to suppress protests and make arrests, highlighting the ineffectiveness of the police or, as some believe, that the government does not trust the police to crack down on protests with sufficient fervour. The response also reflects an embedded military influence in government decision making and could usher in a new phase of repression in Zimbabwe.

Nor has the country seen a comparable level of violence, looting and destruction by ordinary Zimbabweans. Some of it is undoubtedly orchestrated, but most appears to be spontaneous. More than ever, young people are willing to confront the government in the streets, reflecting desperation and their deep-seated frustration. Anecdotes are surfacing of huge sections of road being shut down and railway carriages being dragged off the rails and into the streets, signaling new levels of revolt. Such actions suggest a growing number of Zimbabweans are less risk averse in terms of a confrontational approach, adding a highly dangerous new element into the mix.

Just fifteen months ago, a coup forced strongman Robert Mugabe from office. Wasn't Zimbabwe full of hope then?

The optimism that accompanied the ouster of long-time President Robert Mugabe in November 2017 has evaporated. For a time, many Zimbabweans thought his replacement, Mnangagwa, might be a reformer, though he had long been a ruling-party stalwart who was Mugabe's vice president. The international community, including a number of critics, were prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. Now, however, cynicism is growing in many quarters, albeit for diverse reasons. There are signs of

discontent even among ZANU-PF loyalists and members of the security forces, who are also bearing the brunt of economic decay.

Controversy blighted Zimbabwe's much anticipated elections on 30 July 2018, even though the courts endorsed the outcome. Many believe that the use of state resources in Mnangagwa's favour pushed him over the finish line in the presidential contest. Unprecedented spending by the government ahead of the elections contradicted promises of financial prudence. The MDC refuses to recognise Mnangagwa's government as legitimate, while the government accuses the opposition of being unpatriotic and promoting a nefarious regime change agenda. The country is polarised, attitudes on both sides have hardened and prospects for bridge-building have withered.

Since the elections, the new government has managed to deliver few tangible results. People in Harare complain that the administration is akin to a new driver in an old taxi. Many see the government simply as a reconfiguration of the ZANU-PF, now freed from Mugabe but dominated by security-sector interests and factions aligned to the new president.

Questions are also surfacing over President Mnangagwa's judgment. He left the country immediately after announcing the fuel price hike, ostensibly to search for trade deals in Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. But such deals are unlikely to resolve the immediate economic issues facing Zimbabwe: while he may drum up some foreign investment in the country, those governments will not provide much needed budgetary support. Nobody believes that Mnangagwa will enjoy anything like the enthusiastic reception he got last year if he goes, as planned, to this year's World Economic Forum in Davos.

Already in December, one of Zimbabwe's leading political scientists was telling me that "the light at the end of the tunnel has gone out". He meant that Mnangagwa's government, while consolidating its authority politically, would be unable to deliver a sustainable, broad-based economic recovery.

What could happen next?

For almost two decades, observers of Zimbabwe have warned of pending economic collapse, mass hunger and social implosion. Conditions steadily worsened, but Zimbabweans employed an impressive array of survival strategies, from emigration producing diaspora remittances to work in the informal sector, where “making a plan”, as per a common expression, has become something of an art form. The apparent stability has fed complacency, a sense that Zimbabwe can keep on bumping along the bottom. But evidence on the streets now suggests that may no longer be true.

The security clampdown is continuing. Notwithstanding its chilling effect on some potential protesters, further unrest in the coming days, weeks or months is a question of when, rather than if. Another initiative for a general strike is already in motion; calls for a “Stayaway 2” on 23-25 January are circulating on social media. Key questions are how organised it will be, given the likelihood that many organisers of the initial street actions are detained, and how the state will respond. Already, there is a de facto nationwide shutdown as towns and city centres remain empty. People cannot move freely because transport is too expensive. Many cannot afford to go to work.

At the same time, the information gap makes it difficult to judge what is happening. Amid endemic misinformation and fake news, some exaggeration of the country’s disarray is likely in play. But in any case, it is unlikely that the mood of confrontation will dissipate quickly. The government may be able to put a lid on unrest and take activists off the streets, but that will not address the conditions that

have brought people out. More confrontational protests seem inevitable even if the crackdown curbs protests for now.

What should outside powers do about Zimbabwe’s crisis?

The biggest challenge at this juncture is to get the government to do something about the unrest besides shoot and arrest protesters. Zimbabwe desperately needs reform if the government is to keep the country reasonably stable and preserve its re-engagement with international donors, a process that started with Mugabe’s ouster. To pull off that reform, it needs broad political consensus, including within both the ruling party and the opposition, but also within other social constituencies. The country is polarised on multiple fronts – ideally the government would commit to supporting the development and implementation of some form of national reconciliation strategy to at least start to heal these divisions. For now, however, such a strategy is not even part of political discourse.

It is unclear, however, who has the leverage to nudge the government from repression to reform – or if anyone wants to do so. In the neighbourhood, the Southern African Development Community did not immediately respond to the unrest. Wider international reaction has been muted. Civil society groups have expressed concern and diaspora groups have marched in Johannesburg. But the South African government, traditionally engaged in Zimbabwean politics, has downplayed the situation. With the prospect of more bloodshed and large-scale refugee flight, the region, and indeed the world, cannot afford to ignore the crisis.

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