Mugabe at war: the political economy of conflict in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT This paper employs a ‘political economy of conflict’ approach to explore the recent deterioration in the governance of Zimbabwe. It argues that this analytical approach, which has been applied by scholars such as William Reno to highly dysfunctional and/or collapsed states like Liberia and Sierra Leone, is appropriate for understanding the current actions of the Zimbabwean government as well, and especially their relation to the military’s unpopular intervention in the recent conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. While Zimbabwe’s current crisis has been aptly described by various scholars as a failure of leadership, this paper argues that such failures of national governments in Africa need to be understood within the broader context of international political economy. Zimbabwe’s lapses in governance extend beyond the state and the national border to features that have non-state and informal as well as international and transnational dimensions.

With unemployment, inflation, poverty rates, and interest rates all running above 50%; with its external debt crisis and severe shortages of food, fuel, water, and electricity; with an AIDS epidemic killing 2500 per week and an estimated quarter of its adult population HIV positive; with its nominally socialist government (one run by the same party that led a successful liberation struggle just two decades ago) riddled by rampant corruption and paralysed by the policy conditions laid down by its IMF/World Bank patrons whom it still periodically labels ‘imperialist’; with the same socialist government bogged down in an unpopular war in the Congo while it tries to repress and co-opt worker–community struggles for democratic constitutional and economic reforms at home, contemporary Zimbabwe seems to defy systematic analysis. (Burkett, 2000: 471)

Two decades after the long bush war delivered democracy to Zimbabwe, the liberators have become the oppressors. (The Globe and Mail, 28 January 2002)

This article will have been published following but written before Zimbabwe’s presidential elections scheduled for 9 and 10 March 2002. Readers, therefore, will have had the advantage I do not have of witnessing what will undoubtedly will be a climactic moment in the country’s history. It is unlikely, however, that the elections, whatever the outcome, will bring a denouement to the tragedy of Zimbabwe’s precipitous descent over the past decade into economic, social and political chaos. As one young Zimbabwean observed:

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Many of us think there will be civil war whatever the election outcome … Neither Mugabe or the MDC [Movement for Democratic Change] will accept the other’s victory. And then what? Even if there isn’t war, we don’t really believe either man can dig Zimbabwe out of the mess it’s now in. (The Globe and Mail, 28 January 2002, A9)

The ‘mess’ to which this young man refers is disheartening, and also somewhat baffling, considering the country’s favourable prospects at independence in 1980. At that time, expectations ran high: a new constitutional democracy was established; newly elected President Mugabe and the African National Union–Patriotic Front Party (ZANU–PF) which he led implemented a social policy aimed at reducing the racial and ethnic cleavages exacerbated by civil war; and the government’s economic policy was intended to produce ‘growth with equity’, thus re-energising the sanctions-damaged economy while alleviating the severe inequities which existed in areas such as education and health. Initially, such measures brought impressive improvements in economic and social indicators. However, by 1990 the economy was in decline and the government was forced to adopt the first in a series of structural adjustment programmes because of escalating debt. Moreover, hints of growing authoritarianism and corruption in the Mugabe regime were troubling harbingers of the governance morass into which Zimbabwe has plunged over the past decade.

After its promising start, many observers seemed reluctant for some time to accept that Zimbabwe’s prospects were as abysmal as indicators seemed to suggest, and as Krieger (2000: 443) put it, ‘hope against grim realities’ tended to prevail. Even now, as foreboding grows daily, overshadowing expectation, a small glimmer of hope still persists, focused mainly on the democratic activism of various civil society organisations. In 2000 particularly there were encouraging signs, first in the defeat of the government’s referendum on constitutional reform and, second, in the strong challenge to the incumbent ZANU–PF in the general election that year by the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Both the MDC and the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), which confronted the government on the issue of constitutional reform, emerged out of the growing politicisation of, and co-operation among labour, student groups, academics, oppositional media, church groups, various NGOs and, increasingly, middle-class representatives from business and the professions (MacLean, 2001). In all, the effectiveness of the opposition movement has been impressive, especially considering that collaboration among these various groups began in earnest only in the second half of the last decade (Nhema, 2001).

The optimism which was generated by civil society’s strength and successes has been considerably tempered since the 2000 elections, however. Even at the time some scholars warned about overestimating the opposition’s prospects. For instance, as Peter Alexander (2000: 399) pointed out, the stark realities following the election were that ‘the MDC did very well in the election, but it did not win. Mugabe remains in power and the people are still poor’. Such caution has been validated by events since the 2000 elections, and especially in recent months leading up to the presidential elections: as Mugabe’s hold on power has become increasingly tenuous, his determination to remain in office has become ever more
tenacious. As a result, societal pressures for change have been met by an ever-deepening spiral of state repression and authoritarianism.

Speculations about the political outcome of the election are increasingly pessimistic. Writing from the vantage point of having just witnessed the gains made by civil society groups in 2000, Alexander (2000: 399) offered four possible scenarios that ranged from: 1) increased mass violence to oust Mugabe; 2) Mugabe’s resignation before the 2002 election (in order to enhance the credibility and electoral strength of ZANU–PF); 3) Mugabe’s peaceful departure from office following defeat in the presidential election; or 4) a continuation of ZANU–PF rule beyond 2002. Judging the last scenario to be the least probable, Alexander argued that popular support for the MDC would continue to grow, making the third scenario the most likely.

Alexander accurately predicted increased growth in support for the MDC; however, like many observers, he seems to have underestimated the lengths to which Mugabe would go to stay in office. Moreover, even if a ‘best case’ scenario (a fair and free election, followed by a peaceful transition of power) was still possible, Zimbabwe’s decline has been so dramatic and so severe that its political future remains highly uncertain and dependent on much more than the outcome of the upcoming elections.

Rather, the country’s prospects for democracy and development are in large part a function of political economy issues that are being played out at regional and global as well as national levels. This is the basic argument of this paper—that the current political trends in Zimbabwe can be understood only within this extended context. Furthermore, the paper argues that an emerging literature on the political economy of conflict in Africa is a useful framework for exploring the links among these various levels. The suitability of the approach has been demonstrated particularly by Zimbabwe’s involvement in the recent conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The country’s entry into the war was not determined merely by an ill-advised foreign policy decision, but rather reflected political economy processes that: 1) are situated in circumstances of Zimbabwe’s colonial and postcolonial history; 2) have international and transnational as well as national dimensions; and 3) involve non-state and informal as well as state players. Exposing the nature of these processes is critical not only for understanding Zimbabwe’s role in the DRC but also for assessing the country’s future prospects for democratic development.

**The political economy of conflict in Africa**

Recently some of the clearest and most comprehensive expositions of the political economy of conflict in Africa have been submitted by political practitioners and/or consultants rather than by academics. Four reports, in particular—three that appeared in 2000 and one in 2001—have galvanised attention around the complex range of issues and actors involved in Africa’s conflicts. These are the ‘Fowler’ Report (2000) on Angola, the Harker Report (2000) on the Sudan, the Smillie *et al* (2000) Report for PAC on Sierra Leone, and the Report of the Panel of Experts to the Security Council in April 2001, the *Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the*
Democratic Republic of the Congo (UN, 2001). The first, by Canada’s former Ambassador to the UN and Chair of the UN’s Panel of Experts on Violations of Security Council Sanctions against UNITA, brought to public attention the causes of the continuing conflict in Angola. It identified high-level accomplices of UNITA in Africa and Europe who, by their activities in the diamond and oil trades, are helping to keep civil strife alive in the country and surrounding region. The second report was commissioned by Canada’s then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, to investigate allegations of abuse by government soldiers against women and children in the Sudan. John Harker, the author of the report, revealed that a Canadian company, Talisman Energy, was complicit in these practices through its exploitation and transport of oil in the area. The third report, commissioned by an NGO, Partnership Africa Canada (PAC), exposed the state/non-state and national/transnational connections involved in the trade in ‘dirty’ or ‘blood’ diamonds that were at the ‘heart’ of the continuing conflicts and traumas of Sierra Leone. The fourth report presented an extensive (and controversial) review of a range of players involved in the DRC conflict, arguing that many were involved in wholesale exploitation of the DRC’s natural resources.

These reports are notable for raising public, government and academic awareness of the causes of some of the most intractable conflicts in Africa. In particular, they shed light on the complex sets of linkages (official–unofficial, formal–informal, state–nonstate, national–international and local–global) that are possible sources and fuelling agents of the conflicts in Africa. The coalitions of state and non-state actors from which such reports evolve, and which they in turn encourage, may also represent innovations in methods of dealing with the new security threats (see more on this in the last section of the paper).

In focusing attention on the backward and forward linkages of conflict, these reports reinforce important insights that are emerging from a growing academic literature on the political economy of conflict in Africa (Bayart et al, 1999; Clapham, 1998; Berdal & Malone, 2000; Braathen et al, 1999; Cilliers & Dietrich, 2000; Reno, 1998; Shawcross, 2000). Scholars who have advanced this approach adopt different analytical lenses and perspectives, but overall their varied treatments situate at least some of the causes of the recent escalation of conflict in Africa beyond national borders, that is, within the context of the continent’s position in the international political economy. Specifically, they draw attention to the connection between Africa’s marginalised position in the world economy and the nature and conditions of governance that have evolved on the continent as a result.

The conditions of chaos and anarchy associated with contemporary African wars often seem to suggest an element of irrationality on the part of office holders in these countries. Yet, as has been pointed out by several scholars writing from a political economy of conflict perspective, there tends to be a coherent, if chilling, logic behind the behaviors of the central figures in African conflicts. In some extreme cases, regardless of how war-ravaged their society has become, those in control of the political forces deliberately perpetuate conflict as an effective means of securing personalistic goals. And they are able to do so because of unique features of African governance structures as they intersect
with the international orders of economy and power.

Among the most important of these features are the unique characteristics of African sovereignty. Throughout the continent, African sovereignty, achieved only recently for many states, appears to be fragile, even ephemeral, and since independence it appears that many African countries have remained deficient in attributes usually associated with statehood.\footnote{1} However, despite the fact that sovereignty does not appear to have served Africans particularly well, ‘the post-colonial states have, since their independence in the decades following the Second World War, emerged as the most strident defenders of Westphalian sovereignty in the international order’ (Clapham, 1998). In Clapham’s view, this is not as contradictory as one might think. Indeed, sovereignty has been regarded favourably, especially by African leaders, because it provides a venue, legitimised by international law and convention, for gaining access to outside sources of wealth as well as a protective shield behind which the sources and beneficiaries of that wealth could remain obscure.

The rent-seeking possibilities associated with the structures of governance that emerge in such conditions of ‘quasi-statehood’ have enriched many African leaders. Yet the latter must usually employ careful manoeuvring, especially among external actors, to retain political control. As Clapham (1998: 20) observes:

\begin{quote}
the relative protection that weak states received from the international system [did not] come free. Governments had to engage in a complex bargaining process, in which they sought to ‘buy’ external support by ‘selling’ what they had to offer, in terms of diplomatic clientage, strategic location, economic opportunity, or whatever else was available.
\end{quote}

The terms and conditions by which these types of relationships are established and maintained tend to be complicated and arcane. Also, they frequently exclude the majority of ordinary Africans from the rent-seeking benefits of ‘quasi-sovereignty’, as well as from human security protections usually associated with ‘full’ sovereignty. Thus they impede the development of accountable and legitimate processes of governance. The lack of legitimate authority of African governments has contributed to the ever-increasing alienation of African citizens and, certainly, the continuing disarticulation of states and societies in much of Africa has been a factor in the exacerbation of domestic pressures for democratisation. For instance, the Zimbabwean government’s growing disregard for citizens’ right to expression and participation, as well as the growing threats to human needs, are at the core of the civil unrest that has erupted in the country.

Recently, Chabal and Daloz (1999) have argued that political instability in Africa is embedded in the continent’s social relations; that, in actuality and in contrast to the label of dysfunctional politics it often bears, ‘Africa works’ with ‘disorder as [a] political instrument’. Taking ‘post-Weberian social and political theory’ (p 144) as their point of departure, they attempt to show that African experiences are not easily understood or explained by Western analytical models. In their words, ‘the political, social and economic “logics” of contemporary Africa come together in a process of modernization that does not fit with the Western experience of development’ (p 143). In order to situate their own
analysis in a more appropriate African context, they ‘attempt to explain how apparent disorder can in fact have its own logic—even if at first that logic seems hardly to contribute to the future prosperity of the continent’ (p 155). Features of African social constructions such as the importance of the community in the formation of the identities of individuals and the prominence of the notion of reciprocity in social relations are central, Chabal and Daloz argue, to understanding the nature of African politics. These social relations, entrenched in traditional beliefs and conventions, do more, then, than merely reinforce the vertical links that are evident in the patrimonial political systems; rather they are ‘logical’ foundations upon which these systems are constructed. Moreover, these authors argue, the ostentatious behaviour of various African political leaders is a frequent source of derision, especially among Western observers. Yet conspicuous displays of wealth and power may reflect cultural mores rather than merely excesses of office. ‘Or to put it another way, it continues to be more important for political elites to display the right kind of ostentation (including redistributing resources to clients) than to demonstrate the potential achievement of the Protestant work ethic’ (p 160).

Chabal and Daloz’s approach is compelling in its attempt to bring African values, identities and practices to bear in analyses of politics on the continent. And, in the sense that most people on the continent survive—some even prospering—‘through sound and shrewd instrumental use of the different registers on which they can legitimately draw’, (p 146) Africa, even including conflicted states, does appear to ‘work’ at some level. As several recent analyses of African conflicts point out, there may be a logical rationale for African instability—that conflict itself may be functional. In Angola, for example, the ‘fog’ of war allows the rebel group, UNITA, and the official government’s MPLA to carry on illicit transnational trade in diamonds and oil, respectively.

However, in Africa’s ‘economies of plunder’, such as in Angola, government elites, rebel leaders and their clients profit disproportionately from the connections between war and trade in minerals. Control of, or connections to, those who run the offices of the state are a critical advantage, as the state has become a conduit for the transactions which both cause and fuel wars. And, because the profits of war are creating wider gaps between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’, usually in direct proportion to proximity to political power, state–society relations are being increasingly strained. In other words, while Africa may indeed ‘work’ at some levels, it does not ‘work’ very effectively for many Africans—especially those displaced or traumatised by war in countries such as Sierra Leone, the Sudan, Angola, and the DRC, where intense and deadly conflicts have emerged around competition for access to lucrative resources such as minerals.

Chabal and Daloz’s analysis, which suggests a common identity, consanguinity and/or social compact between rulers and ruled based on entrenched traditional values, fails to consider the degree to which the political economy of conflict intensifies divisions between governments and citizens, thereby transforming African political culture. Moreover, the analysis presents a rather static explanation of political culture in which the methods and venues by which Africans engage in coping strategies that perpetuate conflict are embedded in traditional social customs and norms. This position not only overstates the degree to which
rulers and ruled operate by the same terms of ‘African logic’, it ignores the impact which external influences may have on traditional behaviour patterns and beliefs. While African political culture may have contributed to producing ‘a system of politics inimical to development’ (p 162), it is important not to discount or underestimate the role of international actors, from transnational business to international financial institutions (IFIs).

Particularly in light of the reports referred to at the beginning of this section, which expose the international business links with African wars, it becomes apparent that African disorder has become instrumental for several people from outside conflicted countries and outside the African continent as well. As a result, many Africans inside these countries, but outside the circles of power, are bearing the brunt of the disorder that often supports (while obscuring) the generation of riches for a few.

One important dimension of the international connections to African conflict is the social and political aftermath of structural adjustment policies. In his analysis of international interventions in African conflicts during the 1990s, Timothy Shaw (1996: 42) argues that, in large part, it was neoliberal reforms of the IFIs which ‘generated the conditions which call for multi-faceted peacekeeping coalitions’. Although measurements of the impacts of structural adjustment programmes on economies, much less on social conditions and relations, are inconclusive, there is little doubt that African people, states and economies have been made more vulnerable because of them (Shaw et al., 1998).

These vulnerabilities are likely to be further exacerbated by the unrelenting pressures of globalising neoliberal capitalism, leading to an ever-widening spiral of disorder. Continuing conflict seems likely and, moreover, will be linked with increased corruption and social anomie in society. As Bayart et al (1999: 116) point out:

Informal and illicit trade, financial fraud, the systematic evasion of rules and international agreements could turn out to be a means, among others, by which certain Africans manage to survive and stake their place in the maelstrom of globalization.

**Zimbabwe and the political economy of conflict**

Zimbabwe’s current ‘crisis of governance’ is at least partly related to these international pressures. The crisis is also situated in the regional dynamics of the ‘political economy of conflict’. Until recently it would have seemed absurd to apply this perspective to the politics of Zimbabwe, a country that appeared to be stable and relatively democratic. However, especially following the country’s entry into the war in the DRC in 1998, the applicability to Zimbabwean politics of expositions such as William Reno’s on ‘warlord politics’ (1998) and ‘shadow states’ (1995) has become grimly apparent. Zimbabwe is not directly comparable with Liberia, Sierra Leone, Zaire (now the DRC) and Nigeria, which were the case studies discussed in Reno’s *Warlord Politics and African States* (1998), in that it has not suffered the degree of overt conflict within its borders witnessed in these wartorn countries, and the main threat to the Mugabe regime is from democratically responsible opponents in civil society rather than from competing
'warlords’. However, Reno’s insights into the emergence of warlord politics are instructive given the current involvement of the Zimbabwean military in the DRC, the escalation of violence in the months leading up to the election in the summer of 2000, and the increasing authoritarianism of the Mugabe regime in response to growing opposition since. Indeed, certain features of decadent leadership described in the introduction of Warlord Politics apply, to a worrisome degree, to present-day Zimbabwe:

In principle, the triumph of informal (shadow state) networks to the near exclusion of bureaucracies, or state collapse in political science literature, could leave rulers in a condition in which they pursue power through purely personal means and that pursuit becomes synonymous with and indistinguishable from their private interests. Rulers thus would jettison all pretenses of serving the interests of a public that may contain dangerous rivals or unruly citizens.

Clearly, an obvious disregard for the public interest, an increasing use of the offices of state for personal gain, and an apparent growth in ‘informal’ networks to maintain the regime are features of the Mugabe leadership. Moreover, if the situation has not yet reached the stage of decline that Reno describes in the other four countries, the main characteristic that tended to set Zimbabwe apart—that is, the government’s attempt (or pretense) to uphold the rule of law—has been seriously eroded in the months leading up to the 2002 presidential election. At least until 2000 the legal, political and social foundations of Zimbabwe’s formal system of governance appeared to be quite firmly entrenched, unlike the ‘remarkably weak formal state institutions’ (1998, 11) of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Zaire and Nigeria. As evidence of these ‘stronger-state’ features, the Mugabe regime took care at least to appear to be ‘playing by the rules’ and, as long as the regime attempted to legitimate its activities, even if through control or perversion of legislative and legal systems, it suggested that the ‘shadow state’ networks had not triumphed.

Since late 2001, however, even the pretense of probity and legality has been largely discarded by the regime. A pattern of descent into political corruption that is not unlike that witnessed in Reno’s examples of ‘warlord’ states has been evident in gestures ranging from tacit (and occasionally overt) complicity with the war veterans’ illegal land invasions of white-owned farms to arrests and restrictions of journalists, the replacement of respected Supreme Court jurists with supporters of Mugabe and the recruitment of young men to a Youth Brigade that is being used to intimidate opposition members and their supporters (The Globe and Mail, 26 January, 2002, A10).

The political economy of decline

Signs of decline began to appear soon after independence, although they tended not to be regarded as ominously as it appears in retrospect that they should have been. In 1980 optimistic projections were based on the economic strength of the country’s well established export-agriculture industry and its relatively strong manufacturing and minerals sectors. Furthermore, Mugabe and his ZANU–PF party assumed power with a high approval rating from the populace and the appro-
bation grew initially when impressive social improvements were achieved under the government’s ‘developmentalist socialist’ policy (Sachikonye, 1995: 184). Investment in social programmes declined soon thereafter, however, thanks to a combination of recession and growing debt. Then, with severe drought conditions exacerbating the economic problems, opposition to ZANU–PF from the rival Zimbabwe African People’s Union–Patriotic Front (ZAPU–PF) escalated into ethnic violence in Matabeleland in the centre of the country.³

As the difficulties grew, there were some warning signs of the type of leader that Mugabe would eventually become. First, the brutality with which the government suppressed the Matabeleland uprisings indicated his willingness to use any amount of violence to suppress opposition. Second, Mugabe announced his intention to establish a one-party system, ostensibly in accord with his ‘socialist’ ideals but, given his obvious lack of meaningful commitment to establishing policies that reflected those ideals, the announcement indicated his more serious dedication to achieving absolute power. Third, he showed signs that he would renege on electoral promises, especially the constitutionally entrenched pledge to redistribute farm land to poor black farmers: only a limited amount of land was redistributed and then most often to government officials or their cronies. Finally, as early as the first post-independence election of 1985, Mugabe and the ZANU–PF showed a penchant for subverting the electoral system, using various tactics that included control of the media, vote-fixing, gerrymandering, intimidation of opposition candidates, and incitement of racial hatred.

Through tactics ranging from patronage to intimidation of the opposition, Mugabe and the ZANU–PF have won all the national elections since independence.⁴ Yet support for the government has waned, especially since the mid-1990s, because of the deepening economic crisis that has been manifested by a continuous pattern of currency devaluation, deindustrialisation, wage decline, retrenchments, and escalating unemployment rates (FMB, 1999). The social effects have been devastating, with funding cuts to health, education, and other social services (MacLean, 2001; Nhema, 2001).

Some of the causes of decline have been beyond the control of the government. Structural adjustment has been ubiquitous in Africa since the 1980s, with most countries, including Zimbabwe, having little option but to adopt a programme and, as many analysts now agree, SAPs have tended to contribute to the compression rather than the rejuvenation of most economies on the continent.⁵ Also, in the early 1990s, drought in Southern Africa added to the economic and social distress. Moreover, although the post-apartheid entry of South Africa into the regional economy may offer some potential for Zimbabwe’s growth in the long term, it has created mostly problems to date in the form of uncertainty and downturn in certain sectors such as textiles.

Nevertheless, the government does bear a large share of the responsibility for the current crisis (FMB, 1998). The government’s policies during the past five years have contributed directly to the economic decline and, especially in the last two years of the 1990s, several policy decisions have been disastrous. Some have also been disgraceful, and several scandals involving the government leadership have been exposed. The more serious policy blunders and violations of probity include:
the arrests (and the alleged torture by military personnel) of the publisher, the editor and a reporter of *The Standard*, a local newspaper in 2000, followed by increasing repression of the press;  
- an attempt to push through unpopular and undemocratic constitutional change;  
- the unpopular payment of huge sums of money to war veterans;  
- the heavy-handed, illegal and clearly explosive decision to expropriate white farmers’ land without compensation;  
- the implicit support for and probable complicity of the government in the violent war veterans’ land invasions, which began during the weeks leading up to the 2000 election and have continued since; and, particularly,  
- the unpopular military involvement in the war in the DRC.

As the government attracted increasing opprobrium, opposition in civil society intensified. The mobilisation of local civic organisations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), churches, students and trade union members led to numerous strikes and public demonstrations. And, within the oppositional movement in civil society, a new level of organisation and co-operation became evident when the NCA was formed in 1999. Comprised of a broad range of voluntary associations which came together to protest against the partisanship and the lack of openness and transparency exhibited in the government’s Constitution Committee, the NCA managed to defeat the government’s constitutional referendum in February 2000. This provoked an intense backlash from Mugabe and his supporters, but it also generated a new resolve for democratisation in civil society that contributed to the near-defeat of the ZANU–PF in the June 2000 election. Despite gerrymandering, stuffing of ballot-boxes, threats and violence against opposition candidates and voters, and numerous election ‘irregularities’, the recently formed labour-led opposition party, the MDC, won nearly half the seats.

**Involvement in the DRC**

Of all the unpopular decisions the government has made in the past several years, the deployment of troops to the DRC conflict has been one of the most odious for citizens, particularly because there was no apparent, ‘rational’ reason for Zimbabwe to become involved. By August 2000 the government had reportedly spent ‘more than 10 billion Zimbabwean dollars (200 million US dollars) in two years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo’ (Panafrican News Agency, 31 August 2000). These astronomical expenditures have been made while the economy has been in ‘free fall’, with, for example, the real GDP falling from $645 in 1995 to $437 in 1999; the GDP growth rate sliding from 7.3% in 1996 to –1% in 1999, and the consumer-price inflation sky-rocketing from 22% in 1995 to 58.5% in 1999 and 80% by mid-2000 (Rotberg, 2000: 51–52).

As a result of the economic situation, Zimbabwe has not been able to pay for its diplomatic missions, nor has it been able to pay for petroleum or energy since 1999. Also, it has one of the highest HIV/AIDS rates in the world (Rotberg, 2000: 52). Facing these challenges, as well as unemployment rates exceeding 50%, it is little wonder that Zimbabweans were outraged by the government’s decision to send troops to the DRC, especially when there appeared to be no clear or
compelling ‘national interest’ rationale. Under the circumstances, few believed Mugabe’s explanation that the troops (estimated to be around 12 000) were sent to ‘protect the nation’s [ie the DRC’s] sovereignty’ (News24, 13 August 2000).

Given the lengths to which Mugabe and the ZANU–PF have been willing to go in order to stay in power, it seemed irrational that they would embark on this extremely unpopular foreign policy misadventure at a time when public opposition was already escalating. Therefore, shortly after the first set of troops was sent off, some observers argued that the deployment may have been a diversionary tactic designed to distract attention from mounting tensions at home. Not a very convincing argument even at the time, it became increasingly less credible the longer the troops remained in the DRC and the more repression was required to quell dissent. A more plausible explanation was that the action was a sop to the military, an attempt to ensure its allegiance to Mugabe. The repressive and illegal measures against the personnel of The Standard following its report of a planned military coup was a clear indication of the government’s sensitivity on the issue. Moreover, the mineral trade in the DRC offered lucrative possibilities for rewarding loyal officers. That this was a more likely explanation for the intervention became more obvious when reports emerged of Zimbabwean military officers being given mineral rights by the late Laurent Kabila, then President of the DRC.

Two years after Zimbabwe entered the war, John Macumbe, a Zimbabwean scholar and long-time critic of the present regime, charged that Mugabe and his friends were ‘looting’ the natural riches of the DRC (News24, 13 August 2000). Such accusations increased with exposures of various connections among Zimbabwean, Congolese, Namibian and Angolan politicians and military with links to international business around trade in Congolese diamonds, gold, copper and cobalt.

Much of the interest revolved around activities in the diamond trade in eastern Kasai and in copper and cobalt in the southeastern Katanga region of the DRC. Companies identified as major players in the gold and diamonds activities included Osleg, controlled by the Zimbabwean Defence Force and the DRC-based Comiex, while Sengamines has played a leading role in the exploitation of copper and cobalt (News24, 13 August 2000). The Mugabe government was forthright in acknowledging these companies, announcing publicly in 1999 that: 1) a joint Osleg–Comiex mining venture had been signed; 2) a Zimbabwean parastatal had received 1.2 million acres of DRC farmland; and 3) the Zimbabwean national railroad would be making a weekly copper-run from the DRC interior (Daily Mail and Guardian, 30 September 1999). In short, the Mugabe regime characterised these developments as ‘good business’ practices. However, critics argued that they were designed for ‘raiding the DRC’ (Daily Mail and Guardian, 30 September 1999). In time, as more and more complex government–military–business connections came to light and ordinary Zimbabweans derived few if any benefits from the mining operations, it became more obvious that these networks had not been established primarily to bolster the Zimbabwean economy.

Such conjectures have been supported by exposures and allegations of shady business practices associated with the mining operations. For example, in mid-
2000 a scandal broke when a Commonwealth official, Dr Moses Anafu, was withdrawn from Zimbabwe because of payments he admitted receiving from Oryx, a diamond company holding a profit-sharing agreement with Osleg and Comiex, and of a concession estimated to be worth £667 million to sell diamonds from Zimbabwe-held territories in the DRC (BBC News, 6 June 2000). The exposure of Dr Anafu’s dealings with the company was only one component of a larger controversy focused around the decision to cancel a bid to have Oryx listed on the London Stock Exchange. Petra Diamonds Ltd, which had planned to merge with Oryx to allow its stock-exchange listing, dropped out of the deal because of Oryx’s connections to Congolese diamonds. At this time concern about ‘blood’ or ‘conflict’ diamonds was spreading rapidly throughout international business circles, at least partly as the result of expositions such as those offered by the Fowler, Harker and Smillie reports. When organisations such as the Israel Diamond Exchange adopted measures immediately to halt the trade in blood diamonds, companies such as Petra were forced to rethink their business associations. Their decisions made news headlines (Duncan, 2000), thus further exposing the networks by which diamonds move from wartorn Africa to Western markets. Such actions contributed momentum for the emergence of an international coalition, centred largely in the Kimberley Process to control the production and sale of ‘blood’ diamonds. This process, which originated at the instigation of the South African government in June 2000, is an inter-governmental form, supported and extended by the United Nations, with input from business and civil society groups to break the chain between conflict and the illicit trade in diamonds (see Kimberly Process website).

**Cracks in the system**

Allegedly, one of the key players in the mineral trade in the DRC has been Billy Rautenbach, a Zimbabwean businessman. In 1998 he had been appointed, reportedly at the behest of Emmerson Mnangagwa, Zimbabwe’s Justice Minister, to chair Gecamines, a major operator in a cobalt and copper mining enterprise in Katanga. When the South African Office for Serious Economic Offences (OSEO) confiscated records from Rautenbach’s home in Johannesburg late in 1999, media accounts of the event referred to his connections to the Zimbabwean military as well as to his complicated business associations involving up to 150 companies, a third of them registered in the Virgin Islands (Daily Mail and Guardian, 26 November 1999).

Apparently, partly because of the nature of these operations, Rautenbach was replaced as the head of Gecamines in 1999 (Daily Mail and Guardian, 26 November 1999). However, his removal from the company may also have been an indication that the business operations he headed had not been as lucrative as anticipated. In any case, it demonstrated that those who have sought to profit from these ventures have not exactly had carte blanche to run their enterprises. Indeed, the recall of Dr Anafu for his links to Oryx, the breakdown of the deal that would have allowed that company to be listed on the stock exchange, and the willingness of South Africa’s OSCE to act against a Zimbabwean national all point to strong counter forces that are attempting to bring some transparency to these
activities. Also, while various high-ranking officials such as the Zimbabwean Justice Minister, Emmerson Mnangagwa, and Congolese Minister of State, Victor Mpoyo, were linked with the transactions of these suspect companies in the late 1990s, there were indications of growing resistance within ZANU–PF and the military to the questionable activities of some, certainly not all, members of both groups.

The increasing opposition to Mugabe and his followers and the growing pressures on his regime from both inside and outside the country suggest that the ‘complex bargaining process’ with outside backers which sustains weak African states (see quote from Clapham, above) is not particularly well developed in Zimbabwe. Consequently, the Mugabe regime has become increasingly isolated in its struggle to maintain control over the government of Zimbabwe. Moreover, its policy options are extremely limited, violence and threats appearing to be the only cards it has left to play.

This does not mean that Zimbabwe’s immediate prospects are positive; still looming are the threat of civil war and the fear that the country’s economic, political and social structures have been irreversibly disabled (The Globe and Mail, 28 January 2002, A9). Ultimately, it is not just which side wins the 2002 or subsequent elections that is at stake, but rather, what form of governance will eventually emerge.

Analyses such as Chabal and Daloz’s, which deem political process to be firmly embedded in traditional social values and relations allow little if any possibility for the widespread changes in attitudes and practices that will be necessary for the development of an open, democratic system. However, shared values have been eroded since the interests of a select elite group have been protected, while those of the broad national constituency have been left undefended. As a consequence, there has been a conspicuous erosion of public support for the Zimbabwean government, not only among urban voters but also in the rural electorate which has been the mainstay of Mugabe’s electoral strength. In other words, the efforts of Zimbabwean civil society to replace rather than uphold the present system contradicts Chabal and Daloz’s (1999: 162) claim that African social forces sustain ‘a system of politics inimical to development as it is usually understood in the West’. The campaign against Mugabe appears to be based, above all, on respect for human rights and the rule of law rather than on an exchange of leadership in a competition to head a neo-patrimonial system. Political process, in Zimbabwe as elsewhere, is dynamic and dialectical, with political culture being an important force, but not an immutable one. Moreover, the processes by which either the ‘instrumentalization of disorder’ or democratisation occur are a function, not only of internal values and relations, but also of various links among individuals and groups within and across local, national, international, regional and global political economies.

Conclusions

Given the downward spiral into corruption, authoritarianism and economic collapse, there appears to be little hope, at least in the short term, for a positive outcome in Zimbabwe. Mounting opposition from an increasingly vocal and co-
ordinated civil society, pressure from international players such as the Common-wealth8 and the apparent, albeit somewhat diffident, concern of the country’s Southern African neighbours9 suggest that the Mugabe regime may be on its way out. However, in the light of recent performances, it seems improbable that Mugabe and/or his cadre of supporters will leave office without resorting to every means within their extensive repressive arsenal to avoid doing so. Should Mugabe lose the election, the prospects for a peaceful transition appear unlikely.

In the long term, the prospects may be better, especially if the more democratic forces which are now backing the MDC continue to prevail after they assume office. The international community can assist in fostering this more hopeful scenario in two ways. First, the donor community should provide direct assistance to civil society groups that have demonstrated a commitment to the ideals and practices of humane and democratic governance. Several well established human rights, women’s and networking organisations now exist in Zimbabwe. They tend to be linked with each other as well as with various transnational civil society organisations. Support for these organisations is vital for the role they are required to play in the transition to democratic rule.

It is inappropriate, however, to assume that the solution to Zimbabwe’s current crisis—of security/development/governance—rests in the democratic momentum developing in the country’s civil society alone, although this is a crucial component to successful transition. Any lasting solutions will depend upon the exposure of the transnational processes that are fuelling conflict and contributing to the ‘criminalization of the state in Africa’ (Bayart et al, 1999). Therefore, the second, and perhaps more crucial, role that the international community can play is to direct attention to the underlying political economy issues that are at ‘the heart of the matter’ of conflict and state decline and to respond in new and innovative ways to address these issues.

To explain conflict and political collapse in Africa requires reference not only to states and political leaders, but also to non-state interests and institutions, and particularly to the multi-level, mixed-actor coalitions that form around issues such as diamonds. It is insufficient to explain Zimbabwe’s current crisis solely as a degeneration in leadership and/or the leader’s disintegration at a personal level, although there is little doubt that these are important aspects of the crisis. It is equally inadequate to explain the current state of governance as a culturally embedded acceptance of ‘the logic of personalized politics’ (Chabal & Daloz, 1999: 162). Instead, to understand the conditions which contributed to Zimbabwe’s increasing degeneration and its involvement in the Congo, it is important to consider the many covert aspects of globalisation: the extensive informal economic relations that are emerging around items such as arms, blood diamonds and drugs and the world of offshore banks and money-laundering these criminal activities spawn.

The ‘political economy of conflict’ perspective challenges prevailing notions about solutions for controlling conflict as well as assumptions about its causes. Just as analysis must be extended beyond states and state-actors to understand the nature of the issues involved, solutions require mixed-actor approaches (see MacLean & Shaw, 2000). The four recent reports that were discussed briefly in the introduction of this paper point the way, by their origins as well as their
insights. Despite a different ‘genesis and evolution’ of each, all involved the input and support of a mix of state and non-state actors. Moreover, in exposing the different levels of interaction involved in the different conflicted countries examined, they have highlighted the usefulness of response by mixed-actor coalitions. In essence, analyses such as these provide empirical grounding for the observation that human security and development cannot be advanced by states alone. Rather, the multidimensional character of the new security issues requires that solutions to conflict be sought in complex and changeable coalitions of heterogeneous actors, including representatives from state/inter-state actors, civil society groups and business sectors.

Notes

1 In their oft-cited work, Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg (1986), for instance, observe that Africa’s states tended to exist in juridical form, through the auspices of international law, and had few attributes to support widely accepted empirical standards of statehood.

2 This is the term that has been used by Bayart et al. (1999: 71) to describe countries where public authorities acquire personal assets through their control of the offices of the state.

3 ZANU–PF has traditionally received most of its support from the numerically dominant Shona ethnic group, while its strongest electoral rival, the ZAPU(PF) was supported by the Nbele who are concentrated in the Matabeleland area. Long-standing rivalries between the two main groups had temporarily been put to rest during the war of liberation, but competition resumed after independence, culminating in violence in the early 1980s which ended in 1987 when ZANU(PF) leader, Joshua Nkomo, accepted a vice-presidency to merge the two parties.

4 National elections are held every five years in accord with constitutional rule.

5 Recently, as analysts have begun to scrutinise the actions of the Mugabe regime more carefully and critically, some have wondered whether Zimbabwe’s economy suffered under Zimbabwe’s Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) or because the government, bent on preserving rent-producing activities, resisted implementing SAP reforms, such as privatisation of parastals). See, for example, Rotberg (2000).

6 Alfred Nhema offered this explanation during a lecture at Dalhousie University, August 1999.

7 Mineral trade is also a source of revenue for the actors on the other side of the conflict, namely, the Congolese rebels, and forces from Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi.

8 After considerable debate on suspending Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth, the Ministers decided against sanctions at the end of January 2002, but called for an immediate end to the violence and intimidation. Other international actors have taken stronger action, the European Union (EU) recommending targeted sanctions and Denmark cutting development co-operation ties (see IRINnews.org, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d).

9 In particular, South Africa and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), of which both Zimbabwe and South Africa are members, have been criticised for not taking a more active role in sanctioning the actions of the Zimbabwean government. For a summary of the issues involved, see IRINnews.org, ‘Zimbabwe: SADC talks tougher’, 16 January 2002.

References


