



Mugabe's War

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ALONGSIDE DEATH AND TAXES, count **Robert Mugabe's** election this Friday among life's more depressing certainties.

Behind Mugabe's "victory" lies a grim reality. In recent weeks, the Zimbabwean dictator has savagely crushed internal opposition, making Friday's vote more a coronation than an election. Dreading a repeat of March 29, when Mugabe unexpectedly **lost** the first round of presidential voting to his longtime rival, Morgan Tsvangirai of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), he has sought to efface any possibility of a challenge to his hellish 28-year rule.

Thus was unleashed "Operation Makavhoterapapi?" (Operation Where Did You Put Your Vote?). The question is not rhetorical. A months-long campaign of state-backed repression and mass terror, it has targeted all who dared to vote against Mugabe in March. Thousands have been brutalized; dozens, if not hundreds, are dead. Those Zimbabweans that have not fled the country have been scared into submission. Even Tsvangirai, no stranger to intimidation and worse at the hands of Mugabe's thugs, has withdrawn from what he calls a "violent sham of an election," despairing that he "can't ask the people to cast their vote on June 27 when that vote will cost their lives."

In fact, it already has. The MDC says that at least 86 of its supporters have been killed since the March 29 vote. Human-rights watchdogs conservatively estimate that at least **10,000** Zimbabweans have been beaten and tortured by ruling-party militias. At least 2,000 have been jailed.

Bearing the brunt of Mugabe's vengeance are Zimbabwe's rural provinces. Deemed a hotbed of sedition and MDC support by Mugabe, they have been beset by the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), a combination of police, army veterans and other uniformed sadists who serve, in cold-blooded fashion, as Mugabe's henchmen.

Instances of ZANU-PF brutality are too many to enumerate, but a few stand out for their sheer depravity. In one case, a man was beaten and castrated with barbed wire, dying later that day in a what Human Rights Watch **describes** as a "leaning position because he couldn't lie on his stomach due to his injuries." The victim's crime? He had been listening to the March 29 election results on a Voice of America radio program. In another village, a 76-year old woman was dragged before a crowd and beaten with logs until residents confessed to being MDC supporters. Whether they were in fact sympathetic to the MDC is irrelevant; fear, not facts, is the business of Mugabe's terror squads.

So, too, with the "reeducation camps" that have sprung up across Zimbabwe. Intended to instill fear and root out alleged traitors, the camps are a testament to Mugabe's murderous

paranoia. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Joshua Hammer records this chilling scene:

On the evening of May 5, ruling-party thugs descended on three villages in Mashonaland Central province, a former Mugabe stronghold that had turned decisively against the dictator on March 29. Repeating a pattern that has been seen throughout rural Zimbabwe, villagers were summoned to a "reeducation meeting," where they were forced to denounce the MDC and pledge their allegiance to the ZANU-PF. Then names were called, and those singled out were hustled into the darkness. "Next we heard the whips and screams," a witness named Bernard Pungwe said, describing a night-long rampage that left six MDC supporters dead and dozens injured. "Every time someone screamed hard the chairman of the meeting would stop his lecture and say: 'Listen to the traitors, they are dying.'"

It's not an isolated incident. At another "reeducation" meeting, armed government soldiers dispensed live ammunition to the villagers. As they held the bullets in their hand, soldiers warned: "If you vote for MDC in the presidential runoff election, you have seen the bullets, we have enough for each one of you, so beware."

Pre-election violence is nothing new in Zimbabwe. In the past, Mugabe's regime has been known to ratchet up its intimidation in the run up to a vote. Never before, however, has the violence reached its current scale. "What is happening now," Human Rights Watch observes, "eclipses the violence in any previous election."

That Mugabe must rely on violence as an instrument of policy highlights just how miserably he has failed his country. The economy is a case in point. Independent estimates place inflation at over 165,000 percent, with food staples especially hard hit. In the last year, the price of chicken has risen by 236,000 percent, eggs by 153,000 percent. A loaf of bread, now priced at over \$30 billion Zimbabwean dollars, is unaffordable and, to most Zimbabweans, unavailable. Food shortages are frequent, the legacy of Mugabe's disastrous seizure of white-owned farms in 2002, a move that crippled the most productive sector of the country's fallow economy. Unemployment now tops 80 percent.

Worse, there is no relief in sight. Western countries have passed sanctions and issued the requisite condemnations, but to little effect. An "African solution" to Mugabe's menace, meanwhile, is not forthcoming. With a few exceptions – Botswana, Tanzania, and more recently Angola – the continent has been content to look on as Mugabe wars on his own people.

Most disgraceful in this regard has been the South African government of Thabo Mbeki. As the leader of Zimbabwe's neighbor and largest trading partner in Africa, Mbeki is ideally placed to pressure Mugabe. Instead, out of misplaced sympathy for the man he considers a hero of the struggle against apartheid, Mbeki repeatedly has given the dictator a pass. Zimbabweans have paid a terrible price for his silence.

Not only will this week's programmed election not change that, but it will likely usher in worse torments for the country. Echoing Mugabe's preferred presidential slogan – "The Final Battle for Total Control" – one senior ZANU-PF official recently declared, "This is not going to be an election. This is going to be a war." Let no one say that they haven't been warned.