

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2289
February 12, 2009

Power-Sharing in Zimbabwe: Recommendations for the Obama Administration

Thomas M. Woods

Morgan Tsvangirai of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has been inaugurated as the prime minister of Zimbabwe, but many remain pessimistic about the country's prospects for political stability or economic recovery.

If the power-sharing deal brokered by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is going to help average Zimbabweans, the international donor community must engage. In order to engage, the political arrangement must hold and donors must have strict assurances that resources will flow transparently and effectively to arrest the humanitarian catastrophe that is facing the majority of Zimbabweans.

An Imperfect Arrangement. The power-sharing deal in Zimbabwe is less than perfect and is not a victory for African democracy, but it could be a step in the right direction. Almost one year ago, in March 2008, the MDC participated in a badly flawed electoral process yet still managed to win control of parliament, and Tsvangirai beat Robert Mugabe in the presidential race. Tsvangirai was denied an outright victory and forced into a run-off election with the dictator Mugabe. With political violence on the rise and food used as a weapon against his supporters, Tsvangirai pulled out of the presidential run-off in June 2008. Not even regional leaders who had been reluctant to criticize Mugabe could accept as legitimate his overwhelming victory in the sham election. Forced to negotiate for the first time in his 28 years of power, Mugabe maintained his seat as president with the help of SADC leaders. In exchange,

he agreed to a power-sharing arrangement signed in September 2008.

The mere fact that the shared government took from September to February to form shows that Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party remain disingenuous to the core and callous to the suffering of the average Zimbabwean. In the end, SADC leaders did not pressure Mugabe to make necessary concessions but instead painted Tsvangirai as the impediment to peace. The MDC had little room to maneuver and was forced to accept a deal that many observers have already deemed a failure.

The break in Mugabe's complete stranglehold on power comes at a critical time for Zimbabwe's future. Once known as "the breadbasket of the continent," the country is ravaged by cholera, with more than 70,000 confirmed cases and nearly 4,000 deaths. The unemployment rate is an astonishing 94 percent. HIV/AIDS and food shortages push down life expectancy to just 34 years, among the lowest in the world. Of Zimbabwe's 12 million people, 4 million have left the country, and estimates suggest that the more than 5 million people remaining in the country require emergency food assistance.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Africa/wm2289.cfm

Produced by The Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

For those policymakers and donors who would be more pragmatic and focused on transitioning Zimbabwe away from failed-state status, there is a time-limited window of opportunity to act. As part of the government, the MDC must now deliver a solution. Prime Minister Tsvangirai announced his intention to focus on the country's cholera epidemic and its emergency food needs. The MDC will have few tools at its disposal without outside donor help. Channeled properly and transparently, humanitarian assistance could start to lift the country out of its doomed status, but Zimbabweans will also need help far beyond just food and health interventions if the country is ever to recover.

Recommendations for Congress and the Obama Administration:

- The power-sharing arrangement must be viewed as an imperfect and temporary solution to a profoundly unstable political and humanitarian situation. Transparent and internationally monitored elections must be pursued in the shortest timeframe possible and should be linked to any foreign assistance.
- Regional leaders must be pressured to act as the guarantor of the power-sharing deal. They must specifically hold Mugabe to account for his obligations.
- Given the humanitarian crisis in the country, the MDC should be encouraged to launch the Zimbabwe Economic Management Assistance Program, patterned after the donor-mandated transparency initiative instituted in post-conflict Liberia in 2005.
- Only after transparency and accountability mechanisms are established in collaboration with the international community, humanitarian assistance should be accompanied by development assistance to begin rebuilding Zimbabwe's failed economy. This may come in the form of a Zimbabwe Economic Recovery Act supplemental bill passed by Congress as early as this fiscal year.

- Humanitarian and development assistance must be made contingent on adherence by Mugabe and ZANU-PF to the power-sharing arrangement, immediate and sustained cessation of intimidation and abuse of supporters of political opposition and members of the media and NGO community, and a commitment to unfettered access and distribution of humanitarian assistance by donors and NGOs. Failure to adhere to these principles should result in a suspension of aid.

A Crucial Juncture. Mugabe and his ZANU-PF supporters have been the biggest obstacle to past efforts to alleviate the suffering in Zimbabwe. Their recent compromise, however limited in scope, offers a window of opportunity that must be seized. International donors, including the U.S., must responsibly engage the new democratic forces within the government of Zimbabwe. This includes the immediate delivery of humanitarian assistance and a carefully structured framework for future development assistance—provided its distribution is not constrained or conditioned by political demands. Wait-and-see approaches have not worked in Zimbabwe, and America may be seeing its last best hope for saving the country.

—Thomas M. Woods is Senior Associate Fellow in African Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.