

March 7, 2008

In Crisis, Zimbabwe Asks: Could Mugabe Lose?

By [BARRY BEARAK](#)

HARARE, [Zimbabwe](#) — [Robert G. Mugabe](#) has run this country for so long that his presence is like some common particulate in the air, taken in with every breath. Gladys Sithole can barely recall a Zimbabwe without him, this inescapable “old man,” as she calls him, with godlike powers and all-too-human failings.

A mother of three, Ms. Sithole was once a bookkeeper in a dry cleaning store, but jobs like that have mostly vanished. She is a street peddler now in a collapsed society, where a surreal annual inflation rate of 100,000 percent speedily melts money into nothing, and essential commodities are so scarce that bars of soap are sliced up to be sold by the chunk and cooking oil is traded by the tablespoon.

A presidential election is scheduled here for March 29, and Ms. Sithole said she hoped this time Mr. Mugabe would finally lose. Now 84, he is a former guerrilla fighter who has led the nation since independence in 1980. “Mugabe was a hero of the liberation struggle, sure,” she said. “But now there is an even bigger struggle, the struggle to survive, and he is killing us.”

She may conceivably get her wish. Mr. Mugabe is burdened not only by Zimbabwe’s persevering misery, but also by two formidable rivals. One is [Morgan Tsvangirai](#), a well-known opponent with trade union support; he won 42 percent of the official vote in 2002, when inflation was a mere 139 percent. The other is Simba Makoni, a onetime cabinet member backed by influential figures in the governing party itself; these dissidents are no longer willing to wait for Mr. Mugabe’s death to initiate the succession.

Could this actually be the end for one of the world’s most enduring and complicated political figures, by most accounts a ruthless, vengeful man, revered and reviled, who has presided over one of Africa’s most epic economic debacles?

If Mr. Mugabe did somehow lose, would he withdraw quietly? Would disputed elections propel Zimbabwe, like Kenya, into chaos and killing?

“With the vote split three ways, I don’t think Mugabe can win without a runoff, and in a runoff there’s no reasonable way he would get a majority of the votes,” said Sydney Masamvu, a senior analyst for the International Crisis Group, a nonprofit organization that seeks to prevent deadly conflicts.

But this assessment presumes a fair election, and in Zimbabwe those who cast the votes are not nearly as important as those who count them. It is widely believed by election observers that Mr. Mugabe stole the contest in 2002.

This makes the inclusion of Mr. Makoni, 57, intriguing. He was the nation’s finance minister from 2000 to 2002 and served in the politburo of the governing ZANU-PF party — the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front — until being drummed out last month for his rebellious run for the presidency.

Though only a few senior party members have endorsed Mr. Makoni publicly, some analysts say he has the tacit allegiance of several in the military and intelligence hierarchy, the same types Mr. Mugabe has relied upon for trickery at the polls. Some wonder whether phony ballots might now be more equitably apportioned.

“Makoni arises from the discontent within ZANU-PF, so the system is now divided against itself,” said Jonah Gokova, a leader of the Christian Alliance, a collection of civic-minded religious groups. “Some suggest that if rigging goes on, it will be for Makoni rather than Mugabe.”

The campaigning has just begun in this nation of fertile plateaus, its northwest tip the site of spectacular Victoria Falls. For an octogenarian, Mr. Mugabe does not lack vigor. Jut-jawed, fists clenched, he appears quite fit in his finely tailored suits. His speeches may ramble but they also sting.

He calls his opponents witches and charlatans and tools of the West. He refers to Mr. Makoni as a prostitute without customers, and since the government controls most of Zimbabwe’s media, these remarks are repeated until they seem liturgical.

Mr. Mugabe may live grandly in a 25-bedroom mansion in the suburbs of Harare, but he knows most of his compatriots barely eat a meal a day. Last week, he tried to pacify the restive army rank and file with a windfall pay raise. Crowds at ZANU-PF rallies are often rewarded for their attendance with cornmeal and sugar, dietary staples that have become precious in the denuded grocery stores.

But these sops are secondary to Mr. Mugabe's more muscular stratagems. In past elections, youth brigades were set loose on political opponents, and such patterns of intimidation continue. Two weeks ago, nine members of the Progressive Teachers Union — perceived to support Mr. Tsvangirai and his Movement for Democratic Change — said they were dragooned from the streets and beaten with lead pipes in a ZANU-PF building.

“Only an idiot would believe Mugabe won't win the election, and by 'win' I mean 'steal,'” said Raymond Majongwe, the union's secretary general, still nursing a bruise above his left eye that he said was inflicted with a Coke bottle.

Mr. Makoni began campaigning only in late February, delayed by mysterious logistical hitches: the company contracted to print his fliers oddly out of paper, the drivers he had hired unable to find gas. These problems could have been caused by gremlins at the behest of Mr. Mugabe — or simply have been forlorn facts of life in a capsized economy.

In an interview Mr. Makoni came across as more cautious than cavalier, the career civil servant that his curriculum vitae indicates. A chemist educated in Britain, he worked in Zimbabwe's agriculture and energy ministries before spending a decade as executive secretary of the Southern African Development Community, a regional bloc of nations. He seems to not want to vanquish the ZANU-PF so much as inherit it.

“The government, for all its ills, is not short on good ideas,” he said. “The ideas haven't been implemented correctly.”

Mr. Tsvangirai calls Mr. Makoni “old wine in a new bottle,” and other critics wonder why his voice was unheard publicly while he took part in a government that, among other actions condemned internationally, bulldozed the homes of 1.5 million slum dwellers in 2005.

“I expressed my views” to the president, Mr. Makoni said defensively. But, he said: “Most times, he just disregarded me, and this didn’t happen to me only. It happened to others who expressed their differences.”

Before Zimbabwe was an economic basket case it was a regional breadbasket. But in 2000, the Mugabe government began seizing white-owned commercial farms, and while that might have struck a blow against the country’s colonial past, it also sent the economy into free fall.

If elected, Mr. Makoni would not return those farms. Rather, he said, he would mete out the property among average people instead of dispensing it to ZANU-PF cronies, as is the case now. “There is enough land to be distributed equitably and fairly, just as the official policy says.”

His motivation: “I’ve seen the pain of the people.”

That suffering is hard to miss. Nearly half the nation is malnourished, according to the [World Food Program](#). Major hospitals have stopped doing surgery for lack of anesthesia. Inflation makes a fool’s game of hard work and frugality.

On Jan. 18, Zimbabwe’s reserve bank put a \$10 million bill into general circulation, a maroon-tinged piece of paper with a sketch of water gushing through a dam that might well have symbolized the escaping value of the note itself. Worth enough at the time to buy a chicken, it now will barely buy a few eggs, with a value of about 40 cents.

Zimbabwe’s inflation is officially computed with a dizzying accumulation of zeros that offers little clue to the distress it inflicts. John Robertson, an economist, said the new note was losing value at 70 Zimbabwean dollars a minute. Cash earned must quickly be converted into cash spent; only marketable goods and foreign money hold their value.

“You’ve got to be a genius to keep the numbers in your head,” said Osca Murefu, 27, one of hundreds of illegal money changers openly doing business in Harare.

Some 3 million of Zimbabwe's population of 13 million have left the country, and the money and merchandise they send home provide the only stability against the country's vertiginous breakdown.

Mr. Murefu buys that remitted foreign cash with the Zimbabwean dollars he collects from two sources: merchants who by law must sell their goods in local currency and the flailing government itself, which is disastrously printing oodles of new money to pay its own debts.

Ms. Sithole, the former bookkeeper, does not exactly understand what has befallen her country. She knows only that 90 percent of the jobs are gone, that everyone's savings have been swallowed by inflation, that each house has its own story of personal apocalypse.

In her own woeful tale, she arises each morning to be on the road by 4, carrying 15 buns in a plastic bag, buns that the bakery has "topped up" to a price of \$800,000 apiece and she hopes to sell for a simple \$1 million.

That early, the air is cool and dark, but there is no shortage of spectral shapes in the moonlight. Those lucky enough to still have jobs are walking their way from Harare's outskirts to its hub, their incomes too tiny to afford bus fare but their hunger so big they will perhaps part with the cost of a bun.

"This is what Robert Mugabe has done to us, turned us into a nation of peddlers and beggars," she said flatly, allowing her thoughts to then wander off into the future. "If he remains, we will just die."