Zimbabwe’s Movement for Democratic Change: Do weak systems lead to weak parties?

Chris Maroleng*

Observers of Zimbabwean politics have often pointed out that the current dilemma that the country faces is a result partly of the dysfunctional transition from colonial rule to independence and partly of the failure of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-PF (ZANU-PF) to transform itself into a party capable of democratic government. Both these lines of argument explain the Zimbabwean situation, in particular the narrowing of democratic space that we have witnessed in recent times and the use of violence to resolve what are essentially political problems. In other words, Zimbabwe's multifaceted crisis is the result of failures of leadership and the political party system. In this regard, common sense dictates that in order to create functional political systems, the various elements that form the totality of this system should be composed to a large degree of

* Chris Maroleng is a senior researcher with the African Security Analysis Programme at the Institute for Security Studies.
institutions and political parties that guarantee the accountability of the leadership to the electorate, as well as respect for, and protection of, fundamental human rights, and respect for the constitution and rule through just law. Unfortunately these key ingredients that are required to achieve good governance have been ominously missing from the practice of politics in Zimbabwe for quite some time. Zimbabwe’s crisis of governance and the recent fractionalisation that has emerged in the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) can therefore be located within the context of dysfunctional political parties as well as ideological and strategic deficiencies that continue to plague the country’s body politic.

The recent power struggles in the two main political formations in Zimbabwe can be explained, in part, by the godlike influence wielded by their leaders. In fact, to many outside observers ZANU-PF appears to be organised like a ‘political mafia’ in which the toughest persons prevail, which inevitably results in an ‘infallible leader’ or ‘big man’ syndrome.

Therefore, to many of the Zimbabweans who supported the MDC, this relatively young party represented a refreshingly different leadership model from that of ZANU-PF and a viable break with the previous political leadership styles that had reflected tendencies towards autocratic and even dictatorial rule.

However, the recent actions of the top leaders of the MDC have now raised the questions of whether the opposition, which promised so much in the beginning, is any different from the governing political party that it seeks to unseat and, more importantly, whether the MDC has the depth of leadership to present a true alternative to the mafia-like political formations that Zimbabwe has seen to date. The recent machinations of some of the leaders of Zimbabwe’s fledgling opposition at first glance might seem to confirm these concerns, but before we consider these questions, let us turn our attention for a moment to how the MDC deck of cards fell apart.

In a previous paper that was written before the division in the MDC became apparent to most people, this author warned of the budding cleavages that were emerging within the main opposition political party. That is why it is appropriate to revisit what at the time were considered the main challenges that could lead to the fragmentation that is currently shaping developments and the balance of power in the MDC. In that paper, the author stressed that, “as a political party, the MDC was created by a coalition of civic groups that were united more by distaste for Mugabe and ZANU-PF than by any unity of political programmes”. It can be argued that the MDC came into being because the unifying vision of the liberation struggle had broken down, and the ‘democratic deficit’ and the failing economic environment had emerged as major challenges to the actual experience of liberation.

It was therefore apparent even before the recent discord in the opposition camp came to a head that the MDC might struggle to keep these different social forces unified under its leadership, and that
it might, in future, become divided on ideological grounds and fundamental differences in policy. Some observers point out that “it was the MDC’s belief that the issues of ideology and participation would be negotiated once Mugabe’s regime had been dislodged from power”. Even though the party has done much to avert clashes of interests between the moderates and the militants, the leftists and the conservatives, the young and the old within its rank, judging by the current rifts in the party, the MDC has not been successful in defining a unifying set of values (both inspirational and strategic) that will keep the bond intact before it is consumed by the ‘struggle within the struggle’.

One view of the MDC’s current position is that it is divided, strategically and ideologically, into two broad constituencies, which, for the purposes of this article, are termed ‘militants’ and ‘moderates’. This division can be traced to the period immediately after the MDC’s failure to oust the ruling party at the presidential polls in the March 2002 elections. The militants (represented by the president of the MDC, Morgan Tsvangirai) in the opposition advocated a strategy that would see the party spearheading a mass uprising against the ZANU-PF’s Mugabe-led regime. The arguments in favour of this strategy were that it would exert more political pressure for change on ZANU–PF than it could resist, or that this pressure would result in a radical change of regime in favour of the opposition. The moderates (led by the secretary-general of the MDC, Welshman Ncube), on the other hand, favoured a strategy of pushing for talks with ZANU-PF that would, they hoped, eventually lead to a negotiated settlement between the two principal parties and usher in an end to the political impasse in Zimbabwe. This moderate perspective was based on the view that the Zimbabwe crisis is basically one of political illegitimacy. It was argued at the time that once this key issue was addressed through negotiations, other factors relating to governance, economic reform and the humanitarian crisis would be resolved as the widening polarisation and tension between the MDC and the ZANU-PF were bridged. The MDC’s parliamentary caucus, which is strongly influenced by the Ncube faction, also encouraged participation by retaining their seats in parliament, claiming that as members of parliament they at least had been able to give voice to some opposition against government policy.

The divisions in the opposition really came to the fore in the middle of October 2005 when Morgan Tsvangirai overruled a national council decision, arrived at by a slim 33 to 31 margin, which voted in a secret ballot to participate in the 26 November senate election. Tsvangirai based his veto on the belief that an upper house was an unnecessary drain on taxpayers and would do nothing to improve the lives of ordinary Zimbabweans, and on the fact that the MDC had opposed the constitutional amendment that created the senate during the parliamentary debate on the issue.

Not surprisingly, the president’s attempt to overrule the national council decision was viewed as undemocratic by his critics and intra-party rivals, led by Welshman Ncube and the deputy president Gibson Sibanda. They argued that the national council was the supreme decision-making body between congresses and that Tsvangirai did not have the authority to act contrary to its decision.
In refusing to comply with the decision of the national council, in one fell swoop the leader of the opposition seemed to turn his back on the founding democratic principles of the MDC, which expressed a desire for accountable political leadership, with limited powers vested in any individual, and for a leadership that cannot defy the law with impunity. The autocratic strategy adopted by Tsvangirai was the final straw that prompted the moderate group led by Ncube to form their own breakaway faction, which has come to be known as the ‘pro-senate faction’ of the MDC.

Even before the divisive question surrounding participation in the senate polls emerged, the president of the MDC had shown growing tendencies towards appropriating more power than he is entitled to. In fact, since October 2004, there has been a growing aspect of ‘mafia-like’ behaviour within the MDC, with Morgan Tsvangirai failing to condemn intra-party violence against certain members of his own leadership. In the wake of the 2005 elections, this violence escalated, with several senior MDC office-bearers being physically assaulted by MDC youths inside MDC party headquarters. Two officials suffered serious physical injury as a result of these violent attacks. The decision of the national council to dismiss these youths (who are facing criminal charges) was subverted by the president of the MDC; a few days after their dismissal he insisted on re-employing them as his bodyguards. When there was a call for a further internal inquiry into the violence, Tsvangirai tried to sack his fellow top five officials. It was pointed out that this was unconstitutional – that the president did not have the sole power to dismiss his senior colleagues – and the dismissals did not take effect.

The pressures, both internal and external, being brought to bear on the MDC have now raised the question of whether the MDC can continue to act as an effective umbrella body for the other civil society groups in Zimbabwe that are calling for democratic reform. This factionalism in Zimbabwe’s main opposition party has also served to further highlight the failure and weaknesses of this country’s dysfunctional political party system. The seeming lack of effective leadership and the growing fault lines within the MDC may engender damaging ‘struggles within the struggle’. Because the MDC was formed in a very inclusive and extensively consultative manner, there are many constituencies that have an interest in determining the course it will take in its daunting task of unseating the ruling party.

With the advantage of hindsight it can probably be said that it was inevitable from the beginning that these various constituencies would clash on ideological lines or policy. In fact, history teaches us that where several groups or even individuals are engaged in a struggle against a common enemy, there is bound to be a power struggle among them at some point. The MDC, judging by the recent polarisation in this party, is no exception to this principle of human and organisational dynamics.

The current situation in which the MDC finds itself could result in two possible scenarios. The first is that this is a temporary setback for the MDC, which will eventually be resolved by the
reunification of the rival factions; or, second – and the most likely scenario of the two that will be presented here – that we are now in a period that will usher in the final and irreversible implosion of the MDC as we have come to know it. It will be argued here that this scenario will result in the creation of two separate political formations, which for all intents and purposes will be very similar in ideology and policy orientation to the MDC of the past. The individuals who constitute the leaders may be different, but other than that very little will change, except for the leaders to allow for the effective differentiation of these two new political forces. What is also very likely is that the high levels of support that the old MDC enjoyed will be split between the two formations, resulting in the overall strength of the opposition diminishing, as a direct consequence of these divisions in the opposition camp. The anticipated bickering over the ownership of the MDC brand name by these disparate forces that will probably result in protracted court cases will also have an adverse effect on their credibility.

If these assumptions are correct, the failure of the new opposition groupings to address the structural challenges relating to ideology and strategy that hampered developments in the old MDC, combined with the failure to evolve away from the dysfunctional political party system that has affected all the political parties in Zimbabwe’s past and present, will yield negative outcomes for these new groupings in the long term. These strategic lapses that have been briefly considered above will result in these new political formations presenting ‘new leaders’ (who may also succumb to Zimbabwe’s big man syndrome) and placing them in political organisations that suffer from deficiencies in both policy and ideology. This leads us to the conclusion that in Zimbabwe’s case the weak political system has led to the creation of weak political parties. One can only hope that new political forces will learn the lessons contained in this country’s chequered political history.

Notes

2 Maroleng, op cit, p 3.
3 S Sithole, Avoid secret political deals, Financial Gazette, 11 March 2004. In this article the author points out that where there are several organisations or even individuals engaged in a struggle against a common enemy, there is bound to be a power struggle among them. This warning is particularly targeted at the MDC. The author borrows the concept of the ‘struggle within the struggle’ from the late Professor Masipula Sithole’s classic work Zimbabwe: Struggles within the struggle, published in 1999 by Rujeko Publishers in Harare.
4 Maroleng, op cit, p 3.