ZIMBABWE

More of the same?

RICHARD CORNWELL AND CHRIS MAROLENG

On 31 March this year Zimbabweans went to the polls to elect a new parliament. The ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) had laid the groundwork for yet another victory, having in the last few years hobbled the opposition press, hounded its principal rival, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) by means fair and foul, and either co-opted or cowed the population at large with a welter of blandishments and threats. Under the circumstances, there were few external observers who expected the MDC to achieve anything like its brave showing in the flawed elections of 2000 and 2002. To insure itself against unforeseen setbacks, the government was also careful to exclude from the election observation any foreign observers as were considered unsympathetic to its cause.

Under the circumstances, the MDC did extremely well, securing 41 of the 120 seats. Although this marked a reduction in their parliamentary presence from 57 in the old house, it proved the doomsayers wrong who had argued that the MDC was a spent force. Nevertheless, ZANU-PF's 78 seats, taken with another 30 parliamentarians to be appointed by the president will give the government the two-thirds majority it would need to pass constitutional reforms unhindered. There has been much speculation about its intentions in this regard, with the aim of engineering a smooth and safe presidential retirement when the time comes.

The MDC has already made detailed allegations of gross electoral fraud, with widespread ballot-stuffing, a repeat of the accusations it made in the past two elections. Nevertheless, it has taken up its seats in parliament and has welcomed the election as Speaker of John Nkomo, whose own opening speech was moderate and conciliatory.

The announcement of the new cabinet included the usual number of promotions and demotions, some of which related back to the fall-out from a meeting of ZANU-PF heavyweights at Tsholotsho at which they had tried unsuccessfully to block Joyce Mujuru's elevation to the vice-presidency left vacant since the death of Simon Muzenda.

There was little here to excite Zimbabwe-watchers, save for the reappointments of Joseph Made and Herbert Murerwa to the agriculture and finance portfolios respectively, jobs in which their performance to date has been generally regarded as less than stellar. But these are early days and, with such a daunting task ahead, what has been called by President Mugabe "a developmental cabinet" will probably suffer casualties before the end of the year.

Some analysts speculated that ZANU-PF's enhanced parliamentary majority would provide the position of dominance from which it might actually engage in dialogue with the opposition, perhaps even going so far as to offer them certain positions in cabinet. This would have allowed the government to address certain regional concerns

RICHARD CORNWELL is senior research fellow in the Africa Security Analysis Programme at the Institute for Security Studies.
CHRIS MAROLENG is senior researcher in the Africa Security Analysis Programme at the Institute for Security Studies.

and at least partially to repair the damage done to its popular legitimacy over the past few years. This, in turn, might facilitate a re-engagement with overseas financial institutions, which would seem a prerequisite for any attempt to deal with the country's disastrous economic plight.

The economic situation continues to deteriorate and the government's traditional pre-election largesse has left the budget severely unbalanced. To compound matters, an already large cabinet has been further expanded, with no provision for its financing or for that of the mooted Senate. Gideon Gono, the Director of the Reserve Bank, who has effectively managed economic and fiscal policy for the past year, is said already to have tendered his resignation in despair at the government's inability to balance its books. Certainly one of the early indicators of where this administration is headed will be to watch what he is permitted to do about a devaluation of the Zimbabwean dollar and an increase in domestic interest rates. So far these issues have been anathema to the President, but in current circumstances it is difficult to see how much longer this position can be sustained.

President Mugabe continues to look eastwards for succour, but whence this will come and in what form only time will tell. Zimbabwe's controversial agricultural reforms have left that sector in turmoil, and now facing a drought that some say will be as severe as that of 1992. Foreign exchange is not to be had at official prices, and the fuel situation is resuscitating images of the situation in 1999.

The question now is what the nomenklatura of the ruling party intend to do to avert total economic collapse. The resources available for patronage are shrinking ever further, and the profits of power can only be enjoyed if some sort of economic stability and revival occurs. The internecine party conflict that came to a head in ZANU-PF at the end of last year saw the emergence of a dominant clique centred upon the figure of Solomon Mujuru. He has retained much of the following in the security services that dates back to his time as commander of the armed forces in the 1980s, and represents a consolidation of the Zezuru linguistic group's dominance of the party's structures since independence.

President Mugabe has recently gone on record in Djakarta as saying that he intends to see out his current term of office, which ends in 2008, when he will be well into his eighties. He has also said that he will not choose his successor. The latter statement is probably correct, though not necessarily in the way he meant it. The former will depend not only upon his health, but on his ability to persuade his ambitious barons that he remains essential to their cause. Should he fail to do so, he might find that he has rather more leisure than he bargained for in which to complete his memoirs.