

Is Zimbabwe in a slow-motion race to the bottom?

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Zimbabwe faces a deep crisis of confidence stemming from economic instability, currency problems and ineffective governance under ZANU-PF. Despite international re-engagement efforts, the government prioritises short-term survival over structural reforms. With weakened state institutions, a fragmented opposition and constrained civil society organisations, Zimbabwe remains trapped in cycles of dysfunction, making democratic transformation increasingly difficult.

Key findings

- ▶ Knowledge about how the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) regime is structured and operates at the deep state level is limited. As a result, strategies to nudge it towards democratic reforms have failed.
- ▶ ZANU-PF survives the worst consequences of its misgovernance. It has influenced both the political opposition and civil society organisations (CSOs) and insulated itself from any civic or political action that threatens its power.
- ▶ Electoral processes have failed to produce tangible dividends for voters. Each contested election disincentivises future participation.
- ▶ Zimbabwe's current trajectory threatens CSOs' relevance and ability to consolidate citizen agency and push for democratic reforms.
- ▶ The opposition has failed to reimagine a Zimbabwe that citizens can rally behind, and is constantly outmanoeuvred by ZANU-PF. Its gravitation towards self-preservation and aggrandisement has left citizens with no alternate leadership.
- ▶ ZANU-PF excels at regional diplomacy and exerts extensive influence on the South African Development Community (SADC).
- ▶ ZANU-PF's messy internal succession process and attempts to extend the president's term to 2030 threaten the stability of the ruling party and the country.

Recommendations

- ▶ Zimbabwe's government must prioritise confidence building through key macro-economic reforms. This requires transparency and consultation on significant policy shifts, such as introducing a new currency. Consistency and fiscal discipline are vital.
- ▶ The government needs to embark on a purposeful process to rebuild state capacity for service delivery. This will require depoliticising the civil service, strengthening local government and ensuring the independence of institutions such as the judiciary and the police.
- ▶ CSOs in Zimbabwe must be creative and adapt to the state's use of the law to stifle them. They need to assess their successes and limitations, and formulate long-term strategies that respond to the daily struggles of ordinary citizens.
- ▶ CSOs need leadership renewal, inter-generational exchange and broad-based engagements. Their mandates cannot be conflated with party politics or external funding partners' interests.
- ▶ SADC should craft a citizen-responsive electoral credibility matrix to prevent public disillusionment with elections and with SADC itself.
- ▶ The African Development Bank-led debt dialogue process should promote and link the progress matrix and indicators on public accountability and democracy. This will allow citizens to understand the progress and agreements being reached.

Introduction

Zimbabwe is trapped in a vortex of political, economic and social dysfunction from which there is no clear way out. The Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) has outmanoeuvred everyone: the opposition is ineffective,¹ civil society organisations (CSOs) face an existential crisis,² and citizens generally continue to experience a life of misery and limited prospects.

The international community has changed tack from a reactive critical posture to more constructive engagement, hoping Zimbabwe's government will be incentivised to promote a more inclusive and democratic path forward. In the circumstances, such an outcome appears unlikely. The conflation of ruling party and state interests has deepened; key state institutions are largely compliant with executive whims, with checks and balances selectively applied. The rule of law remains compromised, and the criminal justice system weaponised.

The ZANU-PF government has been able to maintain a semblance of economic functionality. It keeps the 'lights on', at least some of the time, avoiding comprehensive economic governance reform and the hard work of building resilient, accountable institutions. The long-drawn-out standoff with several Western countries – the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US) and European Union (EU) nations – has visibly lost steam, as these parties explore options for 'constructive' re-engagement. ZANU-PF remains firmly in power, having extricated itself from the messy process that characterised the August 2023 harmonised elections.³

Crucial observer missions said these elections fell short of not only regional and international standards but also Zimbabwe's Constitution. The ruling party failed to garner a two-thirds majority at the ballot. But thanks to the opposition's strategic limitations and an obliging Speaker of Parliament, the party has subsequently secured a two-thirds majority in Parliament. The opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), led by Nelson Chamisa, faced several internal challenges, which were enabled by Parliament, the courts and the electoral commission. This resulted in the CCC's spectacular implosion.⁴

The 2023 polls failed to break the cycle of contested elections, which has become a defining feature

of elections since the advent of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).⁵ For the first time, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM) could not sugar-coat its findings. The SEOM concluded that aspects of the 2023 elections fell short of the national, regional and international set standards on holding free, fair and credible polls. The mission's detailed report indicted the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and President Emmerson Mnangagwa's administration.⁶

This view was shared by other observer missions, including the EU Election Observation Mission, Carter Center, and African Union Election Observation Mission (though the AUEOM's conclusion was somewhat placatory).

Cycles of crises over the past 25 years have left Zimbabwe's economy unstable and its political environment fragile

With the elections behind it, the country must contend with economic hardship, increasing poverty levels, political polarisation, disgruntled citizenry, and a trust deficit. According to the World Bank, the number of people living in extreme poverty globally has decreased. However, in Zimbabwe, 'poverty and vulnerability remain high against a background of cyclical agricultural production climate shocks and elevated food prices.'⁷ The strain on the social sector is especially evident in healthcare and education.

Zimbabwe lacks an effective social protection system, with less than half of those living in extreme poverty having access to any form of social protection.⁸ Citizens' vulnerability is exposed when considering the lack of social safety nets against shocks, and the lack of access to healthcare, pensions and savings.

What is the 'Zimbabwean crisis'?

Cycles of crises over the past 25 years have left Zimbabwe's economy unstable and its political environment fragile. The economy is teetering towards hyperinflation, notwithstanding the government's desire to find indicators that say otherwise. Poverty has risen, and incomes have been eroded. The progress of the

crucial debt resolution process was predicated on holding free, fair and credible elections, to which the government agreed and committed.

However, the government and ZEC went on to hold elections that were not credible.⁹ There are no surprises there. ZANU-PF notoriously creates high-risk short-term strategies in order to buy time and retain power. In most cases, the party has correctly calculated how far it can go and how much it can push without significant retribution from the region and international arena.¹⁰

After all, any resolution to the crisis would have ZANU-PF at the front and centre of the conversation. As long as the solutions are diplomatic engagement, it has leverage. This has been a winning strategy. Furthermore, the party has learnt to survive and rejuvenate and keep its foes guessing. It has learnt how to deal with the opposition and CSOs, and it is strategic in its approach to regional and international relations.

Citizens' disgruntlement, rising poverty, unemployment, and collapsing essential service delivery do not shock the ruling party – it is sufficiently insulated from that. Because of the asymmetrical relations that define the state-citizen interface, citizens, in ZANU-PF's grand scheme of things, do not hold the power to threaten its hold over the state apparatus.¹¹ This position of comfort is enabled by the ineptitude of key players, including the opposition, and CSOs' lack of a defined strategy to hold the state accountable.

Worse, the state security architecture seems set against citizens' voices and expressions of discontent. Indeed, ever since the 'military-assisted transition' of November 2017, a general unease and subtle fear have pervaded the country. Civic actions such as protest¹² and dissent have been met with a heavy-handed state response, cowing the population into submission.

In addition, the economic structure has created winners and losers, with the closely affiliated making significant wealth. The high Gini coefficient¹³ rating speaks to this growing inequality gap. The country scores very low on several governance indices. The 2022 Ibrahim Index of African Governance shows that Zimbabwe is increasingly deteriorating on key participation, rights and inclusion indicators. At the same time, the country is scoring positively on economic opportunities.¹⁴

Comparatively, Zimbabwe scores very low in service delivery ranking regionally. It ranks 158 out of 180 countries¹⁵ on the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index. With the 'fight' against corruption, especially within the ruling party and its cronies no more than a promise, graft will likely be institutionalised.

At the same time, the formal economy presents an appearance of progress. Though extreme poverty was down to 42%,¹⁶ it's still high, comparatively speaking. Both the 'hard' economic indicators and Human Development Indicators show positive, albeit slow, change. The World Bank's 5.5% growth projection for 2023 is in itself a positive indicator.¹⁷ But the economy is fragile, and economic growth is neither inclusive nor sustainable.

Key state institutions have been severely handicapped by a system of patronage and the ruling party's desire to retain power

The World Bank notes that 'macroeconomic volatility, including monetary instability and exchange rate distortions, has kept Zimbabwe's economic activity below its potential.'¹⁸ This is a defining factor of the country's economic position, and it threatens sustainability and long-term viability. As always, international and regional indices need to be interrogated against this context. Construction activities and infrastructure projects are evident, especially in Harare, which does not align with the narrative of a country in distress.

What is evident is that the country is performing way below its potential. Key state institutions have been severely handicapped by a long-running system of patronage, political expediency and the ruling party's abiding desire to retain power. At the same time, deliberative politics has failed to bring about an alternative arrangement that people can believe in.

The military landscape – with military influence in state institutions and the private sector, and the secondment of military personnel to state institutions – is incongruent with aspirations for a democratic, capable modern state. This situation is further compounded by the fact that across Africa, so-called democracy hasn't yielded

the much-hyped dividends. Citizens seem trapped between a hypothetical aspiration and a dominant and domineering party aided by the military.

The vicious cycles of poverty and the daily struggle to survive have eaten into civic society's ability to mobilise. Individuals are prioritising the need to survive, and agency is deployed towards livelihoods, resulting in a depoliticised and disengaged citizenry. The lack of confidence in government's ability to meet basic needs and bring about economic stability at both the macro and micro levels has resulted in people finding alternative sources of medical care, social security and pensions.

Crisis of confidence

At the core of the Zimbabwean problem is a crisis of confidence and a huge trust deficit in its leaders, state capacity, and the integrity of institutions. This is a by-product of years of poor unaccountable governance, sustained assault on state institutions, unbridled corruption and political expediency. There is a lack of confidence in the leadership's commitment and will to make the right choices to arrest the long-running crisis through short- to medium-term measures with a clear vision of a long-term national trajectory.

People are not convinced of leaders' interest in resolving vital issues, from economic politics to nation building. Economic stability will likely be elusive during the rest of Mnangagwa's term, depending on how his administration approaches it. However, the distortions in the structuring of the economy present a confusing picture of a country in progress, with much of the population left behind.¹⁹

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The administration's introduction of yet another medium of exchange – Zimbabwe Gold (ZiG) – in April 2024 was in a bid to bring currency stability and arrest inflation. In addition, Mnangagwa in his inauguration statement on 5 September 2023 claimed that the country would reinstate its local currency. While the imperative to have a local currency is evident, the environment is not ripe for this, and such pronouncements only produce jitters in the markets and citizens at large. Over 70% of transactions in the country are in US dollars.²⁰ At the same time, the actual hard currency physically available does not match what is in nostro accounts.

Citizens do not have confidence in the state and its bureaucratic machinery's capacity to deliver efficient and quality services. Successive Afrobarometer reports show that people do not trust the state. In the most recent survey, 72% of Zimbabweans think the country is going in the wrong direction. In its 2022 survey, it found that less than 45% of citizens trust the government.²¹

ACCORDING TO THE
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< 45%

OF ZIMBABWEANS TRUST
THE GOVERNMENT

Citizens have no confidence in the ‘independence of institutions that are constitutionally designed to be independent,’ such as the courts and the elections management body, and in the efficacy and relevancy of Chapter 12 institutions. People generally feel that Chapter 12 institutions are at best copies of supposedly best international practice without adapting them to the Zimbabwe context. At worst, they are public relations stunts designed ostensibly to provide jobs for cronies and friends and as a reward for political allies.²²

Currency crisis and the economy

Perhaps no other aspect better exemplifies the impact of this crisis of confidence than the currency issue. The population and the markets do not have trust in the local currency, and neither do they trust its issuer. Confidence is a function of consistency, predictability and stability in policy positions. The citizens, business community and investors are wary of this currency situation. Citizens and businesses have had their savings wiped out by hyperinflation and business viability has been threatened by a dollarisation and demonetisation of the local currency.²³

The country was forced to abandon the failed Zimbabwe dollar and replace it with the gold-backed ZiG

Investors have faced failure to repatriate their dividends and payments from the country,²⁴ and both individuals and entities have had their bank accounts raided by the central bank for hard currency. Businesses and citizens, when receiving payment in local currency, tend to convert it to US dollars and ‘bank’ it at home.²⁵

The country was forced by market forces and economic fundamentals to abandon the failed Zimbabwe dollar and replace it with the gold-backed ZiG. The introduction of the bond against the backdrop of false information, and the arbitrary attempt to de-dollarise and introduce a mono-currency by way of Statutory Instruments, with disastrous results, are all fresh in the minds of citizens and the private sector.²⁶

At the same time, multiple exchange rates are at play, including the interbank rate, auction rate, and parallel

market. For ordinary citizens, another layer of exchange rate relates to physical Zimbabwe local currency. The government seems overwhelmed, and beyond short-term Statutory Instruments to firefight, the chaos seems uncontrollable. In this context, the government introduced the ZiG – yet another medium of transaction and storage of value. This will remain an albatross around the neck of economic recovery.

Mnangagwa’s government has not moved away from the abiding ZANU-PF philosophy of command and control. This thinking permeates the entire governance spectrum, from the economy to politics. Institute for Security Studies (ISS) research in 2020 found that one recurring theme regarding Zimbabwe’s government and its economic woes was that the state-maintained control of the Reserve Bank.²⁷ Monetary policies are therefore not exempt from government influence.

Interface with private sector

In analysing the private sector, reports note that like any other segment of society, the private sector is not a homogenous group. Over the years, various players have come to the private sector stage, including the military, so-called runners,²⁸ and tenderpreneurs. The sector also includes traditional established business actors, most of whom are listed on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange and other international bourses, emerging entrepreneurs and party-aligned business actors.

The widespread corruption, complex regulatory environment, and inadequate subordinate systems have benefitted some individuals while negatively impacting traditional businesses. Determining the specific affected parties is outside the scope of this report. However, such an exercise would be useful in assessing the constellation of actors and identifying business players with a long-term investment plan beyond immediate accumulation. Such a segment thrives better in stable environments with policy certainty and low country risk premium.

Government-private sector relations have been fractious, characterised by threats, mistrust and finger-pointing. The government blames businesses for attempting to sabotage²⁹ the economy and not being creative enough to survive in the environment. The private sector points to the fact that government’s policy positions and

shifting rules around currency and exchange make it impossible for the private sector to survive – and when they try to be ‘creative’, government accuses them of sabotage. The financial markets have suffered immensely from the erosion of confidence due to the successive hyperinflationary environment and concomitant government policy decisions that have created a vicious cycle over the past two decades.³⁰

What to expect from the Mnangagwa administration

ZANU-PF retains its position as the ruling party with a secure two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, thanks to the implosion in the opposition ranks.³¹ Mnangagwa has until 2028 to work on his Vision 2030. The realisation of this vision is pinned on the National Development Strategy 2021–2025.³² Vision 2030 aims to work ‘Towards a Prosperous & Empowered Upper Middle-Income³³ Society by 2030’ – an ambitious aspiration given the economy’s current state.

The incumbent’s victory gives a sense of continuity in key areas such as economics, state building and politics. Without an election manifesto, however, it is difficult

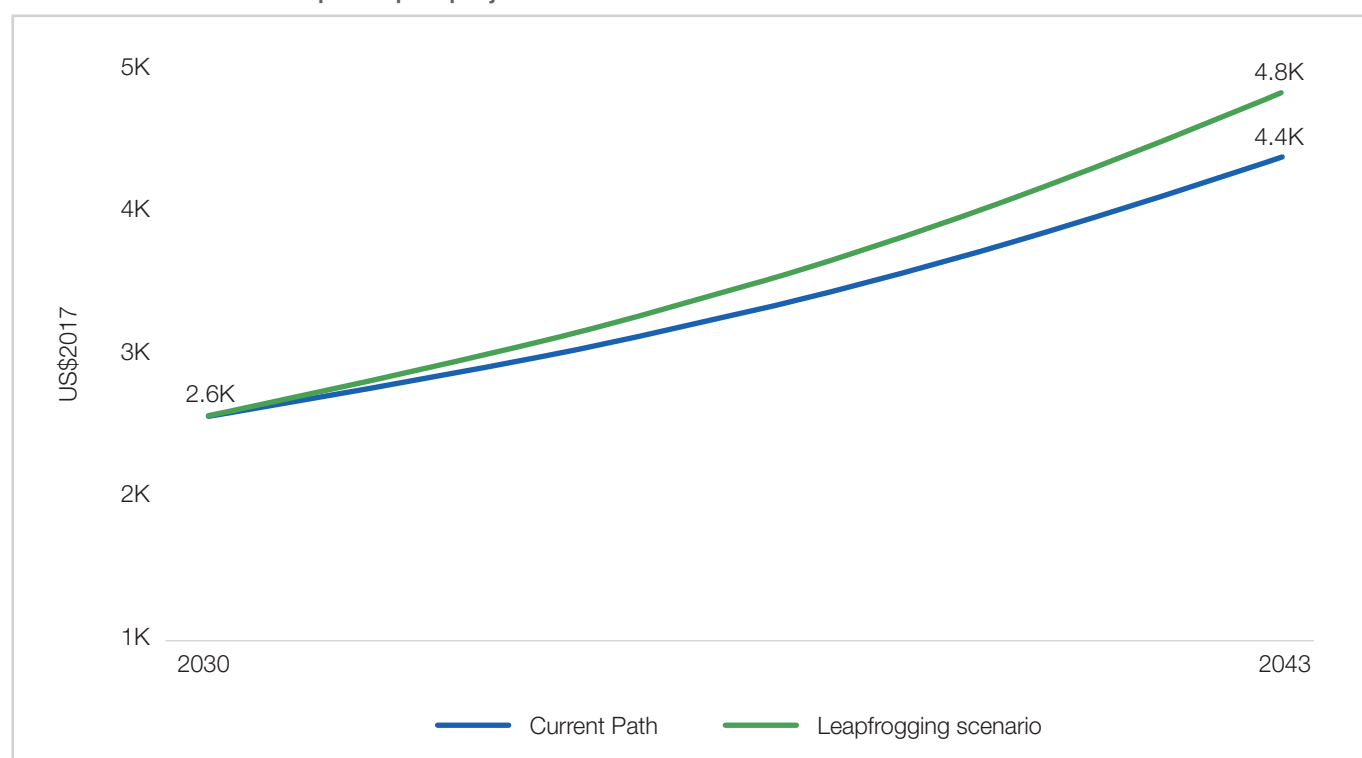
to say what his agenda is and how the administration intends to convert this missing agenda into actionable programmes with clearly set goals and milestones.

The next few years will likely be characterised by more of the same approach to statecraft and economic planning. ISS projections show that even if it took all necessary measures to improve governance and sustain macroeconomic stability – termed the ‘Leapfrogging scenario’ by the institute’s African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme – the country would likely miss the ambitious 2030 target.

The chart below shows that Zimbabwe is projected to reach upper-middle-income status by 2039 – nine years later, using the current calculations. The ‘current state’ refers to a situation where the country continues with the same economic policies and overall approach to governance.³⁴

The ruling party will double down on efforts to weaken, if not obliterate, the opposition in pursuit of a two-thirds majority, and the president will seek a paternalistic relationship with state institutions, CSOs and Chapter 12 institutions. Corruption will likely worsen, and economic

Chart 1: Zimbabwe GDP per capita projections



Source: Adapted from ISS AFI

woes are poised to stay. All this while government continues to pursue the re-engagement agenda, preferably on its terms.

As the ruling party, ZANU-PF understands its constituency's interests better than most. Survival and accumulation undergird its approach to economy and statecraft. Arbitrage, clientelism and patronage form the pillars that anchor its existence. The relationship between ZANU-PF and the military remains key to the party's survival.

It is indeed a quid pro quo relationship with a conflation of liberation war entitlements, sustained mutual interest, and a situation where it seems the military's fortunes are tied to those of ZANU-PF in the political space. The military's increasing role in economic activities entrenches this relationship.

In recent years, the rise of the 'mbinga' (wealthy hustler) phenomenon and the president's call to 'make money'³⁵ have to be understood in this matrix of clientelism and patronage. Simply put, 'Work with us, and limitless money-making opportunities abound.'

This approach seeks to depoliticise economic activities and present economic activities as neutral zones where governance and democratic reform issues are peripheral. This depoliticisation means fewer citizens are willing to engage in the long-term thinking of the structural sustainability of the economy and informal activities. Well-meaning young entrepreneurs and business players will find it advantageous to work collaboratively with the government and distance themselves from governance issues.

The mining sector, fuel, agriculture (including agribusiness), construction, and currency arbitrage opportunities are accessible based on individuals' relationships with the ruling party. Formal business and informal sector players are at the mercy of the economic vagaries and short-term stop-gap economic measures informed by political expediency.

The party and its cronies are, by and large, insulated from the costs of their short-term decisions as they use the state as the locus of accumulation. The long-term impact of these myopic, self-serving and inward-looking policies is felt by ordinary citizens whose livelihoods and savings are wiped out with every decision the party

makes, as noted above with the circles of hyperinflation and economic meltdown.

Economic stability will likely be elusive based on how the Mnangagwa administration approaches it. Indeed it had a rocky start with the introduction of the ZiG.

Add corruption to the mix, and citizens have little to feel hopeful about. From 2022 to 2024, investigative reports showed massive levels of corruption and rot in the current administration. An *Al Jazeera* gold mafia documentary³⁶ brought to the fore the intricate intersection between national interest, personal gain and factional fights within the ruling party. In addition, investigative organisation SENTRY has produced five reports since the advent of the 'second republic' that allege looting, a complex web of patronage, and state institutions beholden to the dominant ruling party.³⁷

Government has been clear about preferring a compliant civil society that toes the official line

State-citizen relations are unlikely to improve, especially regarding spaces for citizens to hold the government accountable and express their displeasure, and platforms to participate actively in conversations of national importance. CSOs will attest to this, as government has been clear about preferring a compliant civil society that toes the official government line in terms of rhetoric on progress and nation building.

Just as it has weakened the opposition, the ruling party has decimated CSOs, taken over the civic space, and destroyed an opportunity for more active citizenry and urgency to be harnessed and mobilised. It has criminalised dissension, civic activism, and any form of holding government accountable.

Events in August 2018 and January 2019³⁸ showed that government would not hesitate to use lethal force against any form of protest or civic unrest. At the same time, through state media the government peddled a narrative that any dissenting voices were counterproductive, and should be shunned by peace-loving and development-oriented Zimbabweans. For the past four years, we have seen the government use subtle but effective methods

of disarming the opposition and intimidating CSOs into surrendering to building the country on which the 'second republic' was focused.

The COVID-19 pandemic allowed the Mnangagwa administration to use legal means to appease the increasingly vocal citizens and activists. It used the pandemic to clamp down on protests and citizens' demands for service delivery and accountability. There were calls for a national shutdown in 2020 in protest against the increasing human rights abuses and the economic crisis attributed to ZANU-PF's mismanagement and rampant corruption.

The government deployed the military to restrict entry to Harare's central business district under the guise of controlling the spread of COVID-19. The heavy military presence and subsequent arrests of key figures such as Jacob Ngarivhume, Job Sikhala,³⁹ Hopewell Chin'ono and Tsitsi Dangarembga have had an enduring effect of silencing voices of dissent.

In addition, the country has seen calculated moves to render the legislature redundant in several spaces. Firstly, parliamentary oversight on key economic issues such as debt and loans has been compromised.⁴⁰ This has been further cemented by the excessive use of the Presidential Powers (Temporary Measures) Act, which saw the government instituting policy through Statutory Instruments. This practice has continued into Mnangagwa's second term. Even with a two-thirds majority, the president does not seem interested in substantive debates but prefers theatres of dialogue that he creates and manages.

Moreover, the relationship between the parliamentary majority and the executive has been lopsided, and this is a Robert Mugabe legacy that Mnangagwa

is maximising. The idea is that party cadres who are Members of Parliament (MPs)⁴¹ understand that their primary loyalty is to the party and not the Constitution. This creates a malleable Parliament that cannot effectively play its oversight role and provide the necessary checks and balances to the excess of the executive. Political parties exert control over their members, who are parliamentarians, and the individual is subsumed into the collective.⁴²

Government dysfunction: strongmen and weak institutions

The public sector seems to take second or third place in discussions about moving Zimbabwe towards stability. At best, this is absorbed in discussions on economic and good governance. The public sector should be seen as a key area in urgent need of reforms in a country that aspires to be a developmental state. It is difficult to envisage turning the country's fortunes around without transforming the public service from its current state of paralysis and dysfunction into service-oriented and purpose-driven.

Sustained assault on state institutions and public service, moving them further away from impartiality and professionalism to loyalty to party and leaders, has resulted in incapacitation and incompetence. Reversing this downward spiral might be hard.

A disillusioned, under-resourced and heavily controlled bureaucracy is hardly ideal for contributing to productivity and playing an enabling role. The World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators gave Zimbabwe the low score of 1.4 in 2024, significantly below Southern Africa's 2.1 average.⁴³ The table below shows the country's current and projected performance compared to its peers.

Chart 2: Government Effectiveness Score

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
Botswana	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1
South Africa	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.9	2.9
Southern Africa	2.1	2.1	2.1	2.1	2.1	2.2	2.2
Zambia	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.1	2.1	2.1
Zimbabwe	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.5

Source: Adapted from Worldwide Governance Indicators (World Bank) and AFI

These indicators measure the quality of the civil service, its independence from patronage, its ability to formulate and implement quality policies, and the extent to which there is confidence in the government's commitments. Zimbabwe's public sector has suffered the weight of the conflation of the party and state, which has resulted in the state becoming an appendage of the party. This has effectively weakened bureaucracy and key state institutions, which are seen more as patronage sites without a clear understanding of their position on the national agenda.⁴⁴

The national political culture informs the public sector's political culture and organisational norms. Clientelism, patronage and loyalty to the party have become the hallmark of the public sector at the expense of merit, efficiency and problem-solving in a country urgently needing problem-solvers in all sectors. Public servants are often more eager to show loyalty than exhibit competence and professionalism in their duties.

Thus, important decisions and approval processes for necessary licences, permits and registrations that fall in the public service remit take long. This has had negative implications in the face of the 'open for business' mantra.⁴⁵ Reforming the government machinery will be painstaking, but it must start somewhere.

Unfortunately, neither the ruling party nor the opposition has proffered concrete plans for setting this transformation into motion and repurposing the government machinery.

The bleeding out of the state by political appointments, brain drain, and incapacitation makes the bureaucracy in its current state ill-fitted for being a facilitator of the national agenda.

Regional and international engagement

ZANU-PF has successfully executed a regional diplomatic offensive that has seen it win over the region and continent on several fronts. Zimbabwe was removed from the SADC agenda in 2009 after establishing a Government of National Unity (GNU), with the region expressing confidence that the political crisis had been resolved.

The government's diplomatic offensive included making the sanctions issue an existential threat not only for

ZANU-PF but for all regional liberation movements still in power. Further, the party has skilfully managed to isolate member states seemingly unencumbered by the liberation movement solidarity. The ruling party's open attacks on SEOM head Nevers Mumba and Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema were meant to remove focus from the key substantive matters raised in the SEOM⁴⁶ report and focus attention on the narrative of a liberation movement under siege.

SADC's efforts to improve its matrices for observing elections suffered a blow. While the idea was good, Zimbabwe was the wrong country to test it, given its long history of hotly contested elections. Unfortunately, this armed ZANU-PF with an arsenal to dissuade the regional bloc from 'intrusive' election observation. Subsequent election observations in Eswatini⁴⁷ and the Democratic Republic of the Congo⁴⁸ saw the SEOM revert to its timid and conciliatory election reports.

The AU and SADC have little to offer in terms of helping Zimbabwe out of its economic and political morass

The balance of power and values that undergird SADC seem to be still very much defined by the liberation movement's 'caucus' in the regional bloc.

The region, on the face of it, seems to agree with ZANU-PF's narrative that all things wrong in Zimbabwe are due to sanctions. The country has two regional member states – Namibia and South Africa – taking up its cause on regional and international platforms.⁴⁹ The region has found itself at best refusing to engage on the Zimbabwean issue and choosing a more diplomatic position, as we saw with the damning SEOM report.

Unfortunately, both the AU and SADC have little to offer in terms of helping Zimbabwe out of its economic and political morass. The regional bloc can neither open lines of credit for Zimbabwe nor act as a guarantor for any such loans on the international market. As such, the support might be a win on political optics, but offer nothing in relief to the country's most pressing needs.

In this regard, the international community considers the creditors accountable to their constituencies, unlike the

SADC bloc, whose citizens do not influence decision-making. The EU, UK and US, and the International Finance Corporation, cannot easily walk away from the reports issued by both regional bodies and their observer missions.

Cost of constructive re-engagement

The international re-engagement drive by the Mnangagwa administration seems to be bearing fruit. The EU, UK and Scandinavia are on board,⁵⁰ albeit to varying degrees. The standoff had become exhausting and had yielded no change in terms of nudging the government towards democratic reforms. However, the conversation must be structured and comprehensive.

The ZANU-PF regime has been scoring positively on the diplomatic offensive and the sanctions narrative. The SADC region has set aside 25 October as Zimbabwe's Anti-Sanctions Day.⁵¹ The continent is singing from the same hymn book. At the same time, measures put in place by Western powers have not been well articulated.⁵² The West has not sufficiently invested in explaining itself, or canvassed for a collective solution that includes the AU and SADC.

Without a diplomatic narrative, the sanctions on Zimbabwe appear hypocritical at best and vindictive at worst. It doesn't help that there was no clarity on the agenda – regime change or regime reform. While the broad terminology of rule of law, human rights, and good governance defines these measures, there are no specific milestones and finish lines.

What would constitute progress, and what act by the Harare government would trigger a revision of the measures? While the EU and UK have significantly toned down their criticisms and initiated re-engagement conversations as far back as 2013,⁵³ the US seems determined to hold the line.⁵⁴

With this in mind, the conversation on democratic reforms and human rights risks being sacrificed or at least relegated to the periphery. However, what needs to be analysed with nuance are these questions: Is it a change in tactics, opting to work with the grain incrementally rather than roughing things up? In that case, how do we ensure that these issues are not made peripheral and convenient conversations? With CSOs' compromised

relationships, would they be in a position to shine the light on their erstwhile partners' engagement with the government, so that core issues are not relegated?

The EU and UK have been positive and conciliatory in supporting a policy of constructive re-engagement with Zimbabwe's government. This re-engagement has found expression in the African Development Bank (AfDB)-led Zimbabwe's Arrears Clearance and Debt Resolution Process.⁵⁵ The process provides a platform for dialogue and engagement between Zimbabwe and its creditors of debt and arrears and suggests ways of ensuring the country's economy gets back on track. The process had set the elections as the litmus test for the government's commitment to reforms.

State borrowing from Afreximbank at interest rates of up to 12% doesn't align with commitments to rein in borrowing

The harmonised elections did not live up to expectations. While they were not outright violent, the creditors must contend with the adverse findings from the EU Election Observation Missions⁵⁶ and the regional bloc report.⁵⁷ The challenge for creditors and the process's facilitator is that while the elections were singled out as the litmus test, no indicators were set and agreed on regarding what determines a free, fair and credible election. The observer missions' reports cannot be wished away⁵⁸ and will have a bearing on the future of engagements.

That in itself is unlikely to derail the AfDB-led debt and arrears resolution process altogether. Engagement must resume in some form and this presents both opportunities and threats to the process. It could mean that the creditors will be eager to push for commitments and clear action steps that show that the government is working towards reforms.

The government's continued borrowing from African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) at interest rates of up to 12%⁵⁹ doesn't align with commitments to rein in borrowing and structure all infrastructure financing in a sustainable manner that doesn't increase the country's debt burden. While there is little doubt regarding the

need for economic public infrastructure, the balance between infrastructure development and debt sustainability seems lost.

At face value, it also doesn't seem that the investment in infrastructure, especially Harare's roads, could catalyse economic growth in a way that could lower the country's debt ratio over time.⁶⁰ This is worsened by the uneconomic interest rates in the case of Afreximbank⁶¹ and the opacity of bank loans.

It is also unclear whether both the party and government agree on the debt resolution process. Line ministries and ministers have demonstrated varying commitments to the process, from Finance Minister Professor Mthuli Ncube being vested in the process, to lukewarm responses from the land reform cluster.⁶²

An opposition out of its depth?

The opposition is once more caught in a bind. Accepting Mnangagwa's legitimacy would be an admission of defeat. But rejecting it would create difficulty regarding practical options to engage with the state either as parliamentarians or as local government authorities.

Meanwhile, the ruling party has ratcheted up its offensive against the opposition. Before the ink was even dry on the General Notice 1380D of 2023,⁶³ which officially gazettes the list of elected officials, the police had already arrested elected opposition MPs in Harare and Bulawayo.

What options are available to the opposition in an environment where the ruling party is prepared to employ lawfare and underhand tactics to obliterate it?

To add to the political drama, a letter recalling 15 elected opposition MPs was received and acted on by the Speaker of Parliament⁶⁴ without heeding communications from the party. This stripped several areas of representation, including Bulawayo, the country's second-largest city, and the Matabeleland North and South provinces.

What options are available to the opposition in an environment where the ruling party is prepared to employ lawfare and underhand tactics to obliterate the opposition? The opposition was in this position before, and the question is whether the August 2023 election outcome found them any more prepared than in 2019.

Increasingly, citizens began questioning the opposition's ability to take decisive strategic positions⁶⁵ and provide leadership at a time when the country desperately needed a solid alternative and a leader to believe in. Zimbabweans went into the elections with little from the opposition regarding mobilisation and practical policy alternatives.



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The CCC offered neither a clear message nor a national vision the citizenry could buy into. Its last-minute manifesto⁶⁶ seemed like an afterthought and read more like abstract ideas than a clear grasp of the political economy governing a country like Zimbabwe, the essence of statecraft, and pragmatic entry points to turn the economy around.

Over 30 years of fighting for democratic reforms and strong institutions has taken its toll on civil society

The opposition leadership has not articulated its economic policy or its ideas to transform the public sector and the kind of state/citizen relations the party envisions. In many forums, such as international TV interviews, rallies and private engagements, the opposition's grasp of economic fundamentals and statecraft is underwhelming.

By all indications, opposition votes were carried more by citizens' rejection of ZANU-PF and a desire for a different dispensation than a result of the CCC's efforts to galvanise the electorate. During Mnangagwa's second administration, the opposition has been fighting to stay alive and in the political game. The ruling party has thrown what it could in its way, keeping it busy either fighting recalls or police bans on its public engagement processes and efforts to infiltrate them.⁶⁷

Yet in all of this, the opposition provided ammunition for the state to use against it. The transition from the late former Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai was messy. It did not imbue confidence that the MDC and Chamisa believed in due process, institutions and democracy. Instead, it was driven by opportunism and power.⁶⁸ This proved to be its undoing. And by February 2024 the CCC was left leaderless after Chamisa quit – his reason being that ZANU-PF had hijacked the party.⁶⁹

It seems the opposition is again caught up in the dilemma of what to do post-elections. How does it remain relevant and position itself to undertake the functions of an informed and grounded opposition in Parliament, while starting the painstaking work of citizen engagement and conscientisation in earnest?

The current political problem is that there seems to be no space for the contestation of ideas in the opposition. The political culture favours loyalty, charisma, and a track record (of fighting the ruling party) rather than ideas and robust critical engagement.

To an extent, this has been the shortcoming of the governance-oriented CSOs in two ways. One is an incestuous relationship with the opposition, sometimes making separating the two difficult. Second, a long-term strategy is lacking to facilitate urgency among citizens. The model of civic education in Zimbabwe in the past two decades has not been grounded in actual citizen empowerment by way of critical thinking and galvanising citizens to engage and advocate for their socio-economic aspirations beyond being good voters who know how to vote wisely.⁷⁰

Civil society at an inflection point

CSOs that could have played an active role in resisting the excess of politicians and private sector players are at an inflection point. The signing into law of the Private Voluntary Organisations Act⁷¹ ushers in a new level of legal impediment that puts civil society in a stasis. The law severely curtails CSO independence and potentially criminalises CSO activities on human rights and democracy.

The current sterile political environment, a defeated citizenry, and a beleaguered civil society call for in-depth introspection. Over the past decade, 'struggle' fatigue, dwindling donor funds, the conflation of the opposition and CSOs,⁷² informalisation of the economy, and the November 2017 military-assisted transition have taken the steam out of CSO momentum.

At the same time, ZANU-PF has carried out a sustained attack on the civic space using lawfare, threats and harassment.⁷³ While civil society is in a lull, ZANU-PF is consolidating and capitalising on the economic disaster that has created 'new' wealth and informality to build a narrative of Zimbabwe on the move. The Constitution and key state institutions have become instruments of convenience for the ruling party. ZANU-PF is clear: it prefers a pliant and 'patriotic' civil society that operates within its set parameters. While the ruling party is clear though, civil society apparently is not.

Over 30 years of fighting for democratic reforms and strong institutions seem to have taken its toll on the sector. Significant wins, such as the 2013 Constitution, have not been sufficiently capitalised on. The envisaged realisation of basic rights, dignity and functional institutions has not happened. At the same time, civil society seems unclear on what to do to ensure the intended benefits from a new Constitution are fully actualised and that ordinary people enjoy basic rights.

The greatest resource that CSOs have for canvassing for change is citizens. CSOs and social movements mobilise rights holders, activate their agency, and facilitate processes that give voice to the issue. What has happened to Zimbabwe's CSOs could have been a failure to mature this relationship and strategically shift with changing dynamics.

The broad-base mass movements of the late 1990s had workers' unions at the core.⁷⁴ Trade unions proved a key cog in mass mobilisation, convergence and narrative building. By nature, formal workers in all industries readily lend themselves to an organised agenda. They have a considered level of appreciation of socio-economic dynamics and the impacts of bad governance and weak institutions. Economic mismanagement hits them hard, and weak structures close out avenues for redress. This became fertile ground. CSOs rode on this movement.

With economic failures came divestments and de-industrialisation, resulting in a shrinking middle class.⁷⁵ The formal sector has all but disappeared. In its place is the informal sector – which is heavily fragmented, survivalist and challenging to organise. Moreover, ZANU-PF has tapped into this sector by controlling access to critical resources such as space for vending, authorisation to undertake artisanal mining, and movement of goods.⁷⁶

For most in the informal sector, it pays more to be 'apolitical' or to openly 'support' the ruling party than to have a voice and demand rights. The short-termism that defines the informal economic space makes it difficult to mobilise them for structural and institutional gains. In addition, CSOs do not seem to have the tools and the necessary understanding of the sector's politics to penetrate and begin low-key, sustained engagements.

CSOs in the governance and human rights space by and large had not critically engaged with rural communities at

the same level and as intimately as they had with urban citizens. The Fast Track Land Reform exercise further closed out this space by creating a new relationship of patronage with much of the population.⁷⁷

Citizens in rural areas, who constitute many Fast Track Land Reform programme beneficiaries, became beholden to the ruling party. ZANU-PF presented a narrative that their stay in these resettlement areas was tied to ZANU-PF's electoral fortunes, and CSOs were not adept at communicating with rural people.

It pays more to be 'apolitical' or to openly 'support' the ruling party than to have a voice and demand rights

In some instances, the governance rhetoric sounds abstract and divorced from the immediate needs of rural communities. Moreover, the neoliberal orientation (which ultimately seems borrowed and shallow to understanding CSOs in Zimbabwe beyond sound bites) dictated that CSOs use the language of all rights, including property rights.

CSOs' lack of engagement with resettled Zimbabweans also meant they could not argue for the ownership rights that could untangle these resettled Zimbabweans from ZANU-PF's hold based on their access to land. This effectively closed them out from engaging with the resettled farmers.

To this point, the relationship between urban-based CSOs and rural communities has been largely transactional, with models not based on an understanding of the political economy of the land dynamics and rural socio-economic organisation. A cursory look at most CSO modules and booklets on governance, democracy and community engagement reveals a lack of in-depth socio-anthropological dynamics.⁷⁸ Often these modules are 'cut and paste' to treat the understanding and application of these concepts as uniform.

Without formidable trade unions and with scant understanding of rural dynamics, especially the A1 resettlement schemes,⁷⁹ CSOs are in the cold; at worst, they're a grouping of professionals with no relationship

with the lived realities of rural communities. At the same time, the massive economic woes that have seen the emergence of the informal sector have also depoliticised urban citizens, whose priority has become survival.

CSOs under Mnangagwa

The government has weaponised the law and emasculated the opposition.⁸⁰ The ruling party stealthily decimated CSOs, encompassed the civic space, and destroyed an opportunity for more active citizenry and urgency to be harnessed and mobilised. The ZANU-PF government criminalised dissension, civic activism, and any form of holding the government accountable. Under Mnangagwa, it has sucked the life out of CSOs.

The work of human rights governance and democracy took a knock from the 2017 military-assisted transition as the overall environment became non-permissive to seemingly divisive activities. This was further compounded by the general sense among citizens of a 'new dawn' after over three decades of Mugabe's rule.

The weaponisation of the law increased during COVID-19, with pandemic measures used to thwart dissenting voices

Also significant was the weaponisation of the law that increased during COVID-19. While measures to contain the pandemic were necessary, there was a sense that government used these measures to thwart any dissenting voices and political activities. The curfew announced in June 2020, just before the national shutdown called by Jacob Ngarivhume of the Transform Zimbabwe campaign, was more to contain protests than for COVID-19. Between May and August 2020, several citizens, civil society leaders and journalists were arrested.

The COVID-19 containment measures restricted movement and interaction, directly impacting CSOs' capacity to engage with citizens and to organise and mobilise. A significant impact was seen on labour, especially regarding the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe and junior doctors. It seemed that as the post-2017 era unfolded, citizens again looked to labour to lead the charge and protest against austerity

measures under the Transitional Stabilisation Programme and subsequent Statutory Instruments.

The net effect of these arrests was to browbeat citizens into unquestioning submission. Lawfare continues, with government drafting more repressive and draconian laws and several Statutory Instruments. Key legislations are the so-called patriotic clauses, part of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, and the Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Act.

These laws and the state's actions have put civil society in a stasis, resulting in a limping civic body that is self-conscious and self-censoring to the point of paralysis.

The intensified use of the law and state violence sucked the life out of civic activism and organised protests moving increasingly towards rule by law. What is more, the shift towards 'constructive' re-engagement by the traditional funding partners, which started around 2013, is in full gear. What this has done is to expose the limitations of civic activism in a space where the agenda must be negotiated for funding.

Private Voluntary Organisations Act

The Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Act, 2025 was gazetted on 11 April 2025. While its stated intention seems reasonable, the overall implications will likely impact negatively on CSOs' operations, funding, and ability to freely engage in civil and political programming. The law is designed to increase government oversight and control over CSOs.

New stringent requirements that target registration, reporting and fundraising will likely impede CSOs' ability to operate and fulfil these new legal obligations. The new amendment must be understood within the prevailing political context and historical relationship between civil society and government under ZANU-PF.

The process of registering a private voluntary organisation has historically been used to sift CSOs, with organisations working on human rights, political work, and active citizenry being denied registration. As a result, many organisations working in this area have been registered as a trust under a different law. This act makes it mandatory for all PVOs to be registered with the Department of Social Welfare.

Some provisions in the amended act are ambiguous, for instance, the requirement that CSOs should not engage in political activity. Civic activism, advocacy work, human rights governance and anti-corruption activities could easily fall under these new restrictions. Organisations engaged in these activities are faced with the possibility of not being registered.

International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) must obtain a memorandum of understanding with a government ministry under which their work falls. This poses challenges for international NGOs working on governance, advocacy, and human rights issues.

Lack of strategy

For the past 12 years, CSOs have found themselves grappling with key questions about what the change they envisage looks like and what methods could bring it about. A combination of donor-driven programming and a lack of strategic and critical thinking left CSOs fragmented, with multiple tactics, but without a clear long-term vision and strategy.

The current structure lends itself to 'inbreeding' as there are spaces where only people who have worked together and, in some cases, mentored each other, stay and engage in their echo chamber. Indeed, CSOs have been speaking among themselves for the longest time with the same audience and leaders. There is limited room for fresh ideas and activists to participate in transitioning Zimbabwe to a mature democracy.

Moreover, ZANU-PF seems to have successfully worn out the sector and brought them to a space where they must engage with the government on its terms to remain open. Working with government is complicated by the fact that it is not through shared values and principles, but rather NGOs' need for survival, and, to some extent, the conflict between being shut down or compromising so they can continue serving their constituencies. The Mnangagwa regime prefers a paternalistic relationship with CSOs under the guise of a national development partnership.

Professor Eldred Masunungure writes that in their programming and conceptualising of how to bring about change, Zimbabwean CSOs post-GNU did not sufficiently facilitate the development of citizen agency, build conscious and critical-thinking citizens, and

reconfigure the power relations between ordinary people and decision makers. Instead, the focus has been on working with citizens as voters as this is easier and fits into most funding cycles.⁸¹ Part of the reason for this approach was the incestuous relationship between CSOs and the opposition party.

Regime change or regime reform

Zimbabwe's government has, over the years, labelled CSOs as regime change agents.⁸² These accusations were buttressed by two developments: the incestuous relationship between CSOs (or CSO godfathers) and the political opposition, and the neo-liberal democracy narrative adopted by CSOs, which appeared to show that they and their funding partners were closely allied.

Like with sanctions, ZANU-PF successfully pushed this narrative,⁸³ and CSOs did not vigorously deny it. It is likely however that CSOs intentions were always to push for deliberative and participatory democracy, not necessarily a change of government. Nevertheless, ZANU-PF has come to resent these terms, and associates any conversations or advocacy around them as part of the regime change agenda.

What can be done?

In some ways, the country has been here before. The economy is struggling, and the currency crisis persists. Ballooning debt is suffocating opportunities for recovery. The 2023 elections and government's controversial policy positions demonstrate that ZANU-PF doesn't shy away from making high-risk decisions. They also show that it will see how far it can push to get its way in the key re-engagement process in the form of the high-level debt dialogue.⁸⁴

The state machinery is ill-equipped to support transitioning the country to stability. The opposition is hamstrung by a leadership crisis, and CSOs find themselves at an inflection point encompassed by the state, urgently needing self-introspection and new strategies.

At the same time, the ZANU-PF government seems willing to muddle through with nuggets of success in a few sectors, but without a consolidated plan of how to build Zimbabwe into a developmental state. The National Development Strategy 1⁸⁵ risks a

similar fate to that befalling preceding economic and development blueprints.⁸⁶

There are no easy answers and there is no magic wand. ZANU-PF realises it's at an advantage, and it will take significant chances to push the envelope (and pull it back) in its re-engagement agenda.

Using its age-old strategy of wearing down its opposition, ZANU-PF's purposes for re-engagement do not necessarily gel with entrenching deliberative democracy.

Rather, they are a deflection tactic that takes away steam from the human rights, good governance and democracy conversation in Zimbabwe.

ZANU-PF is secure in its knowledge that resolving the crisis will involve the ruling party in one way or another. It is also confident in its military-guaranteed hold on power. As such, a multi-pronged strategy should be employed; one which acknowledges ZANU-PF's high-risk game and the importance of staying engaged.

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