



**Compiling this update has been as difficult as trying to keep up with Zimbabwe's inflation which catapulted from 66 000% in January to 100 586% by February 21 (Mugabe's 84<sup>th</sup> birthday).**

### **The Economy**

From millionaires in poverty, Zimbabweans have descended to become billionaires in poverty! The IMF and other independent economists believe inflation has now reached 150 000%, thus making it the highest inflation rate in the whole world, for any country not at war. Consequently the Zimbabwe dollar has plunged to **19 million** against the US dollar and **25 million** against the UK pound with no signs of any improvement between now and March 29.

Currently a banana costs Z\$1million while a newspaper costs Z\$3 million!

### **The Elections**

On March 29 about 5.2 million registered Zimbabweans will go to the polls to elect councillors for local government, senators, Members of Parliament and a president for the next 5 years. The presidential candidates are: Morgan Tsvangirayi (**MDC**); Dr Simba Makoni (**Independent**), incumbent Robert Mugabe (**Zanu PF**) and Langton Toungana (**Independent**).

The entrance of Simba Makoni into the presidential race has raised the stakes. He is an ex Finance Minister, former Executive Secretary of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and an ex-ruling party Politburo member, signalling a possible implosion in the ruling Zanu PF party.

Opinion is divided among Zimbabweans at home and those of us living in the Diaspora over what will happen on March 29. Some claim Simba's candidature is not genuine and also charge him for weakening the opposition MDC's chances of unseating Mugabe while others submit that Simba comes in with a real chance as he is highly regarded across the Zimbabwe political landscape. He is neither tainted with failure, corruption nor bad reputation.

### **The Electoral Framework.**

The conditions under which this election is held are no different from the disputed 2002 presidential poll. I am on record as submitting that there can never be any free, fair and credible elections under Zanu PF. Mugabe has appointed the Zimbabwe Elections Commission(ZEC). The registrar general (a.k.a. rig star general), Tobaiwa Mudede, is still at the helm of the key processes in spite of an overwhelming lack of confidence by the electorate. The State still holds a tight grip on the media and freedoms of assembly and speech are severely curtailed, effectively leaving any contending parties with huge logistical challenges around accessing the electorate.

Violence is bound to mar this pre-election period with little control by the police. They have continued to let some sections of the society, such as the war veterans, become a law unto themselves.

### **Zanu PF- MDC Talks.**

Ten months of talks, mediated by South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki have not yielded any visible outcome but rather have created confusion for Zimbabweans living in the Diaspora and at home. The two MDCs have jointly issued a statement effectively disputing the claim by Thabo Mbeki that the talks were successful and both parties agreed on all key issues.

Most disturbing is the absence of a full report on the talks from SADC, Mbeki's office or from the two MDCs to the media. Sceptics now doubt the talks were ever seriously conducted and some submit that Mugabe used them to buy time from the opposition and later ambush them with an election date. The MDCs have agreed to participate 'under protest and with a heavy heart' but from this vantage point their words seem meaningless rhetoric.

The MDCs could have refused to participate in the elections and put their facts squarely before the mediator Thabo Mbeki. He would then have had to report this failure to SADC. For the sake of all Zimbabweans the MDCs needed to ensure a guarantee of a conducive electoral environment before agreeing to the elections. Now that they are in the race there is therefore no doubt that Thabo can brag and say he has done his part because all parties are going to the polls on March 29.

### **Contesting Parties.**

True to political life parties mushroom and spring on the eve of the poll. On February 15, 12 contesting parties registered with the Zimbabwe Elections Commission (ZEC), a body whose composition is also highly contestable. The most widely known parties are the ruling Zanu PF and the two MDCs. That the two MDCs could not sign a pact and enter this poll as one strong opposition is regrettable. One of the two MDCs has not entered a presidential candidate and is said to be backing Dr Simba Makoni whom they hope will form a government of national unity as soon as he wins. Some analysts are predicting that the presidential poll will be won after a re-run as no single candidate will garner the required 51% or better number of votes to win the election outright.

### **Election Practical Challenges**

The ZEC has announced there will be 11 000 polling centres and argue that this will make it possible for people to cast their ballots between 7am and 7pm on the Saturday. The location of the polling centres has yet to be publicised. They have also indicated that media coverage and election observers will be by invitation only, suggesting that those media who are perceived to be unfriendly will not be welcome. The same will go for observers. Mugabe's government has already indicated that the EU will not be welcome at all.

Each voting person will be issued with four colour coded ballot papers which is likely to make the elections complex for voters. There is a chance that not everyone, especially in the urban areas where population density is high, will be able to cast their ballot in time. Under the circumstances this could lead to outbreaks of violence.

### **The Simba Factor.**

Simba's emergence as a presidential candidate poses its own challenges. He is likely to divide the Zanu PF vote thereby causing the ruling party to implode. This should be welcomed by all progressive forces.

Some people argue that he is equally dividing the MDC vote but I disagree. By their inability to resolve their differences the MDC already split the vote well before Simba announced his candidacy. Perhaps their failure to unite gave Simba an opportunity and politics is as about seizing opportunities.

### **Possibilities and Probables**

1. Zimbabwe will experience a very high voter turn out on March 29.
2. The angry and disappointed Diaspora population, estimated to be about 3 million, will register their frustration in varying forms all over the world. UK and USA based Zimbabweans have staged mock elections and vigils already. In NZ the Save Zimbabwe Campaign will organise a mock election and other actions on the very Saturday in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland.
3. The divisions of allegiance within the civil service, security forces and other non-state actors may help to ensure fair elections as they will want to follow correct procedure to protect their vested interests.
4. It is highly probable, I contend, Mugabe will be made history come March 29.
5. In the unlikely event that there is some major fraudulent activity between now and the time results are announced, Zimbabwe may explode into anarchy. There are questions as to how the law enforcement and security forces will respond. They have just received a 300% salary hike ahead of all other civil servants in an effort no doubt to buy their loyalty.
6. How SADC, AU, and the international community will respond remains a challenge to those of us working for a better outlook for Zimbabwe.
7. Zimbabwe police chief, Augustine Chihuri, warned in a press conference this week that police will use guns should the situation get out of hand at any given stage of the electoral process.

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