

Digging a Grave for Crumbling Zimbabwe

Clinging to the reins of power, Robert Mugabe is driving the opposition, and his nation, into the ground.

By Scott Johnson

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June 18, 2007 issue - Last Maingehama was on his way to a memorial service when he was kidnapped. A little after 2 p.m. on March 20, in the middle of an upscale Harare neighborhood, government thugs dragged Last out of his car, tied a blindfold around his eyes and drove him into the Zimbabwean savanna. For the next five hours they beat the 33-year-old businessman and opposition activist relentlessly with hard wooden "battlesticks." They pounded the soles of his feet, he says, in an account verified by two independent human-rights researchers. They broke his left leg just below the kneecap. And then, when he was bruised and bloody and unconscious, the men left Last for dead and disappeared into the night. When Last finally crawled back to the road, half naked and petrified, he flagged down a passing tractor. But it is a sign of how pervasive the climate of fear has grown in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe that even to his rescuer, Last lied about what had happened in the bush that night. "I told [him] I was robbed," Last recalled recently. "I was afraid even of that farmer."

To the outside world, the 83-year-old Mugabe has looked more conciliatory recently. Last week his ruling ZANU-PF party announced that it would compensate thousands of white farmers whose land the government began seizing seven years ago. Just days earlier, Mugabe sent a high-level team to South Africa to negotiate with Zimbabwe's main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), in meetings engineered by South African President Thabo Mbeki; the talks are meant to lay the groundwork for free and fair presidential elections next March. Behind closed doors, African leaders recently chastised Mugabe harshly. "My understanding is that they took him to the woodshed," says Christopher Dell, U.S. ambassador to Zimbabwe. According to several sources, including one in the room at the time who refused to be identified speaking about a private meeting, Mugabe seemed "sort of defeated" and expressed contrition to his fellow leaders.

Inside his country, however, Mugabe's rule is increasingly taking on the outlines of the worst dictatorships—another Burma, or even North Korea. On a rare journey into Zimbabwe, NEWSWEEK found a nation dominated by fear and the ever-present secret police, where a suspicious population is gradually turning on itself. Since early March, when police violently dispersed an MDC rally and arrested the party's leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, some 500 opposition foot soldiers have been abducted, beaten and dumped miles from their homes. Neighbors are enlisted to spy on neighbors. Speaking out, even on the most mundane issue, is often met with a harsh response. If he cannot rig the March election, Mugabe seems intent on making sure no one will dare support his challengers. Tsvangirai, who suffered severe head wounds while in detention, says: "We're under siege."

So is Zimbabwe. The lush green country once boasted Africa's highest literacy rate. Now, statistically, a Zimbabwean woman can expect to live only to the age of 38. The government says inflation is running at 3,700 percent, but experts say the actual figure is closer to 19,000 percent. Last week two separate U.N. bodies estimated that by early next year some 4 million Zimbabweans—one third of the population—could go hungry. An additional 3 million are living abroad now, and as many as 2,000 more flee each week. South Africa, worried about stability as it prepares to host the 2010 World Cup, has stepped up deportations of Zimbabwean migrants back across the border.

Mugabe came to power in 1980 as a hero, having led a brutal war of liberation against the white-rule government of Ian Smith. For more than a decade he was feted as a reformer who educated his countrymen. Among other African leaders, that reputation silenced any criticism of his brutal treatment of rivals, just as it has in the past few years as his forces set about intimidating opposition leaders, beating prominent activists and cracking down on the press.

But such tactics have drawn fierce and unwelcome attention abroad; a British Foreign Office minister recently warned that Mugabe was opening himself up to war-crimes charges. So now Mugabe is going after the "nuts and bolts" of the opposition, says Roy Bennett, a former parliamentarian who fled Zimbabwe last year. Authorities are focusing on drivers, accountants, secretaries—the anonymous workers who keep the movement afloat. "What [the government] has done is move away from the high-profile people," says Dell. "Now they're hollowing out the opposition at the grass-roots level."

In Harare, NEWSWEEK spoke to one of the new targets—a woman who holds a midlevel administrative position in the MDC. A week earlier, Harare police hauled her into the central police station's notorious "law and order" section. There officers from the Central Intelligence Division—one of several different spy departments—forced her

to drink several liters of water until she vomited repeatedly and urinated on herself. She was kept for two days and then released without explanation. Since then, the cops have called her several times a day to check in. "Why aren't you at your desk?" they taunt when she leaves work. "We can see you now." They called again just before she met a NEWSWEEK reporter. "I'm scared all the time," says the woman, who asked that her real name not be used for the sake of her family's security. "I don't know how much longer I can go on like this."

Indeed, the intense scrutiny can be crippling. An independent human-rights researcher who supplied NEWSWEEK with documents detailing the recent attacks and abductions against opposition workers spoke of how the police monitor her house and her movements throughout the day. "You have no idea what's going to happen next," the researcher says, looking around nervously at the other customers in a café. "Every day now has become about just surviving to the next day."

Mugabe's goons see enemies everywhere, not just in the opposition ranks. The slums that ring Harare have been devastated by 80 percent unemployment and crippling fuel and electricity shortages. There, government spies and young militiamen—indoctrinated and trained in special camps—lurk in the muddy lanes. When NEWSWEEK visited 53-year-old "Patience" K. in a modest shack with a corrugated-tin roof and bare concrete floors, an older woman posted herself by the window, pulling aside a frayed yellow curtain to watch for unfamiliar faces.

Patience, a mother of six and member of a local women's organization, was arrested on April 24 along with 55 other women and children when they staged a sit-in to call attention to the massive power outages that strike Harare daily. She says the protesters, including five children under the age of 4, were held for two days in a single room where enraged police beat and trampled on them repeatedly, threatening at one point to "feed them to the crocodiles." The cops broke Patience's wrist. A 3-month-old boy, whose mother was caught in the flurry of blows, suffered a broken leg. "But what they did to us—it worked," says Patience. "We haven't done anything since then."

Most insidious is the impact all this is having on ordinary Zimbabweans, many of whom now eye each other with deep suspicion. Cell-phone conversations are kept brief. Fake names are used with strangers. A persistent rumor in Harare has it that the Chinese recently built Mugabe a sophisticated listening post outside the capital from which to monitor e-mail and phone calls. "No one trusts anyone else anymore," says Moses Mzila, an opposition parliamentarian from the southern town of Plumtree. In his district, traditional chiefs have been pressured to name which of their followers sympathize with the opposition; MDC supporters are then denied food aid. Two weeks ago the government began requiring that school principals supply detailed personal information about teachers to state investigators.

The opposition has itself been riven by paranoia and personality clashes. A bitter policy dispute caused the movement to split in October 2005, and the two sides spend as much time sniping at each other now as at Mugabe. "Their strategy is to keep on dividing us until there is no opposition left," says Arthur Mutambara, a rival to Tsvangirai who is also participating in the South Africa talks. Still, Mugabe is taking no chances. He recently gerrymandered Zimbabwe's districts to add more than 84 seats to his parliamentary majority. He's also "reactivated" the war veterans he used to usurp white-owned farms. "What are they doing that for except as in preparation for violence?" warns Mzila.

In his 27 years in power, this isn't the first time Mugabe has struck out hard. He brought treason charges against Tsvangirai in 2005 and then jailed him, only to release him later when the case proved baseless. Prominent MDC activists and agitators have been murdered in the past several years. Even as far back as the early 1980s, when Mugabe was being hailed as a cold-war hero in the West, he cracked down on rivals in Matabeleland, in the south of Zimbabwe, leaving an estimated 30,000 dead and no obstacles to one-party rule.

The question now is whether his death grip on power will break Zimbabwe. At current production levels, the country will face a million-ton shortage of maize this year. Hyperinflation continues to increase, and may soon require the nation to switch to the more stable South African rand. Mugabe has acknowledged to some how serious the problems in his country are. "He knows there is a crisis," Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete told NEWSWEEK last week. So far, a massive uprising doesn't seem imminent. But there isn't much holding back outright confrontation, either. At this point, Mugabe might, in fact, welcome one.

With Karen MacGregor in Durban

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