



Crisis? What Crisis?

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Introduction¹

There is a question knocking around about how best to characterise the nature of the Zimbabwean state, a question that gets more urgent every week. The government's view is that it is a state in trouble, but trouble induced by external pressures, and generally, in response to criticism about how poorly the country is doing, responds by blaming sanctions and the hostility to the land reform process. Zimbabwe, without doubt, incurs more than its fair share of international attention, just as Rhodesia did before Independence, but, as before Independence, not without reason. However, and just like the pre-Independence government that was fighting "communism" (and hence blameless), the forty-year old Zimbabwe government does not accept in any way that it must take the blame for the parlous state of the nation: rather it blames all the problems on external forces, opposition political parties, and, since November 2017, on the legacy of Robert Mugabe.

However, the facts are damning. There is no doubt that Zimbabwe's economy is failing; no doubt that it owes an enormous amount of money to international finance institutions and other countries; no doubt that billions of real dollars have illicitly left the country; and no doubt that a very large number of citizens have fled the country. There also is no doubt that its human rights record is extremely poor; and, finally, no doubt that its elections are widely criticised, by both opposition political parties and international observers.

Fragility in Zimbabwe

Any general overview of Zimbabwe paints a very sad picture, and the breadth of the problems that face the country have led more than a few to argue that Zimbabwe is "*fragile*", and some even to argue that it is a "*failed*" state.² The government always responds furiously to these charges, arguing that it has a mandate from elections and has functioning state institutions, and is certainly not fragile or failed. It responds rather more hollowly that there is no "crisis" in Zimbabwe, a view no longer even accepted by South Africa.

Assuming that there is some solid basis for assuming either "*fragile*" or "*failed*" status, other than mere rhetoric, can there be basis for these assertions? There is one way to test the argument, by reference to the [Fragile States Index \(FSI\)](#), produced annually by the Fund for Peace. Using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, looking at around 10,000 different data sources, and analysing between 45 to 50 million articles and reports, the FSI calculates an index of "fragility" for 178 countries. Thus, FSI provides an empirical basis for evaluating the claims about fragility or not.

On every indicator of a "fragile state", Zimbabwe ticks the box. FSI sees Zimbabwe as a very high-risk country, and the country scores badly on every indicator, rated now as the 10th most fragile country in the world in the company of Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Congo (DRC), Central African Republic, Chad, Sudan, and Afghanistan. Most of these countries have active war going on or serious internal conflicts: Zimbabwe gets on the list by dint of extremely poor governance alone/

Zimbabwe scores 99.5 on aggregate score, as compared with Finland (16.9), rated the most stable country out of the 178, or, in SADC, with Botswana (59.5), Lesotho (79.7), Malawi (83.3), Mozambique (88.7), Namibia (66.4), South Africa (71.1), and Zambia (85.7). Essentially, the higher the score the more likely the country is fragile.

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² We do not argue that Zimbabwe is a "failed" state. There is a government, a parliament, state institutions, and a functioning judiciary. All would be largely absent in a "failed" state.

Examine the 12 measures, and their individual scores (out of 10), that comprise the overall FSI score, and see what this means about Zimbabwe.

- **Security Apparatus [8.8]:** *“The security apparatus should be under full civilian control, and not in charge of the state”*. Zimbabwe is described more accurately as a military state with a civilian face. This has been overtly clear since November 2017, and coup, inappropriately called a “military-assisted transition” by many countries that should have known better. The recent appointment of senior, military affiliated persons to run the Ministry of Health does little to gainsay this view.
- **Factionalised Elites [10.0]:** *“The presence of ethnic, class, racial or religious divisions”*. Zimbabwe has been experiencing fracturing of elites since 2014, and long before during the Liberation War. The ruling party is quite clearly composed of warring factions, and the opposition too has serious fractures.
- **Group Grievances [6.7]:** *“Divisions and schisms between different groups in society – particularly divisions based on social or political characteristics – and their role in access to services or resources, and inclusion in the political process”*. Zimbabwe is beset with group grievances. The grievances are so serious that a transitional justice mechanism was inserted in the amended constitution, and the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) set up. Much of the issues relevant to this variable are all covered in the point above, and especially the grievances arising from Gukurahundi
- **Economic Decline [8.1]:** *“Patterns of progressive economic decline of the society as a whole as measured by per capita income, Gross National Product, unemployment rates, inflation, productivity”*. Little needs saying about Zimbabwe’s economic decline: debt, corruption, and informalisation are common cause for every citizen. There is declining Foreign Direct Investment, with FDI only 5% of forex earnings in 2019 and hyperinflation (737%) is re-emerging. A [recent report](#) estimates that US\$32 billion may have been illicitly siphoned out of the country.
- **Uneven Development [7.9]:** *“Inequality within the economy, irrespective of the actual performance of an economy”*. Whilst there is clearly uneven development, and the creation of a super-wealthy elite, there is no evidence of development, massive informal employment (76%), and all the gains of past decades have been lost;
- **Human Flight & Brain Drain [7.3]:** *“Economic impact of human displacement (for economic or political reasons”*. Millions in the diaspora, all skilled people leave as soon as they can, and tens of thousands of the unskilled too. However, the diaspora does provide a significant contribution to forex earnings, about 30% in 2019, but this is most likely taking a big dip in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic;
- **State Legitimacy [9.4]:** *“Representativeness and openness of government and its relationship with its citizenry”*. Whilst the government can claim minimal legality by merely holding elections, there is no political trust in either the government or the state any longer. All elections since 2000 are disputed, by opposition political parties as well as national and international observers, and even repudiated by the African Union itself as was the case in 2008, and this forced the establishment of a government of national unity. [Political trust has been steadily eroding from the late 1990s](#), and definitely worsened by the government’s lack of trust itself in the citizenry and its continuous resort to coercion;

- **Public Services [8.6]:** “Presence of basic state functions that serve the people”. From health to education, and in every area in which the state should deliver public goods and services, it can only be concluded that public services are absent for the ordinary citizen. The collapse of the health services pre-dated the Covid-19 crisis, and Zimbabwean citizens face extreme peril as a result. Most serious of all, is the enormous number of citizens who are food insecure, 7 million according to the UN in 2019, and still rising in 2020;
- **Human Rights & Rule of Law [8.2]:** “The relationship between the state and its population insofar as fundamental human rights are protected and freedoms are observed and respected”. Human rights are violated routinely, and with virtually no redress, and the country has *rule by law* rather than *rule of law*. [The evidence here is overwhelming](#), and is even getting adverse comment within SADC countries now;
- **Demographic Pressure [9.0]:** “Pressures upon the state deriving from the population itself or the environment around it. With nearly 70% under the age of 35, the well-educated youth of Zimbabwe are unemployed and informalised. The risk factor of the “youth bulge” for civil disturbance cannot be minimised;
- **Refugees & IDPs [8.2]:** Pressure upon states caused by the forced displacement of large communities as a result of social, political, environmental or other causes, measuring displacement within countries, as well as refugee flows into others”. It is common cause that millions are now refugees, and tens of thousands have been internally displaced by the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, Operation Murambatsvina, and are still having their homes destroyed;
- **External Intervention [7.3]:** “The influence and impact of external actors in the functioning – particularly security and economic – of a state”. Whilst no country seeks to intervene directly in Zimbabwe, the country suffers under restrictive conditions and sanctions, has SADC and the AU continually engaged in normalising Zimbabwe’s domestic and international relations, and, for a country not at war, remains an international problem.

These measures result in FSI viewing Zimbabwe as the tenth most fragile state in the world. It is also fair to comment that Zimbabwe has risen from fifth most fragile in 2006 to its current position, but would seem to be damning the government with faint praise. It is clear whether one uses a metric such as FSI, or even less complicated measures, that Zimbabwe is in the deepest trouble it could be, and, in the context of the Covid pandemic, it is likely to get into deeper trouble.

It is not necessary to go into detail about most of these measures, the facts relating to them are notorious, especially Zimbabwe’s disastrous economic performance that seems to make the pages of the international press somewhere on a daily basis. Three of them – *security apparatus*, *factionalised elites*, and *group grievances* – deserve more comment because they speak to the heart of why Zimbabwe is fragile, the failure of governance.

The Core of Fragility

The issues around *security apparatus* derive not only from the coup, but also from the growth over time of the “[securocrat state](#)”. The coup was perhaps the final step for the securocrat state, and it was a coup in every respect, whether or not the international community ignored it for expedient reasons, or whether the Zimbabwean courts condoned it as “constitutional” in the most egregious fashion. The decision by Justice Chiweshe that the Constitution allowed a military intervention outside of an order by the President, and validated by parliament, is clearly

incorrect. This judgement has yet to be tested properly in law, and the only attempt to date by some civil society activists was thrown out of court on a technicality, much as the MDC Alliance challenge on the 2018 Presidential election was similarly dismissed.

Since November 2017, it is evident that the military have major power within the state. Certainly in the form of senior soldiers, apparently “retired”, occupying the highest offices in the government, but also placed in many important state institutions. The opacity of the Zimbabwean state means that it is impossible to determine whether all these soldiers are actually retired or merely deployed into the state. There is the additional issue of the military’s economic interests that have broadened and deepened since the foray into the DRC in 1998.

The military also are much more visible in ordinary civilian life, particularly under the Covid-19 epidemic. This began in the aftermath of the 2018 elections and the deployment of the military to control a civil protest, resulting in shootings and deaths of civilians. The very unsatisfactory [“Motlanthe” Commission](#) recommended a full investigation into the shootings, and unsurprisingly this has not happened, presumably because the deployment was both unconstitutional, and would reveal the extent of military control of the government.

Most serious of all is the increased political violence since the coup and the demonstration that the military is an increasingly common perpetrator. The respected Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum has shown this in a [recent report](#). This report indicated that not only have violent events increased since the coup in 2017 in comparison with the period 2013 to 2017, but also that the military had become significantly more frequent perpetrators.

Thus, the presence of the military within the state and overtly on the ground in policing the civilian space does not suggest that *the security apparatus is under full civilian control, and not in charge of the state*. The contrary is correct.

Factionalised Elites bedevil Zimbabwean politics, forcing all manner of pacts and inappropriate solutions to deep problems. There is long history of fracturing and tensions within Zimbabwean political parties, but we will confine ourselves to the period since the Inclusive Government and the Global Political Agreement as a starting point for the present. This was quite clearly an “elite pact”, taking no cognisance of the result of the first round of 2008 election, or the political and economic realities. It should be stressed here that the lead up to the election in 2008 also revealed a serious fracture within ZANU-PF that was cured by the GPA. It is evident that there was a concerted effort to remove Robert Mugabe through the creation of the Mavambo challenge for the presidency and the *Bhora Masango* campaign.³

The divisions within ZANU-PF began almost immediately after the 2013 elections, started with the purging of the Mujuru factions, then went through the vicious fights between two factions, termed “G40” and “Lacoste”, and culminated in the November 2017 coup. Any doubts about the basis for the coup being a factional, and probably ethnic, purge are contained in detail in the Appendix to ExcelGate, Jonathan Moyo’s expose of the 2018 election.

This appendix, is apparently a summary of the meetings between Robert Mugabe (still President of Zimbabwe) and a mediation team composed of Fr Fidelis Mukonori, George Charamba and Aaron Nhepra, Acting-General of the CIO, and signed by these three. It points out repeatedly that this is not an attempt to remove Mugabe, but, rather, an exercise to save him, the Party

³ The term refers to a Shona saying, “*kick the ball into touch*”, and, in the context of the 2013 elections meant do not voter for Robert Mugabe. The campaign was confirmed by Dumiso Dabengwa at a SAIIA/SAPES conference in 2016.

(ZANU-PF) and the nation from elements within the party. The effect of the coup therefore is to remove so-called G40 from positions of power.

This turns out to end in purging again, and this involved both dismissing opponents from high offices, and bringing charges of corruption against many of both these and others. Close observers of the internal environment of ZANU-PF point out that this all involved a removal of Zezuru-linked people and replacement by Karanga-affiliates.

The troubles and travails of the MDC are documented extensively. From the failure of Morgan Tsvangirai to anoint a successor after the 2013 elections, there has been steady attrition into factions to this very day, and the conflicts, aided by the courts and parliament, over who owns the party. However, it is worth pointing out that the MDC Alliance in contrast to the MDC-T (the “Khupe faction”) did put up a creditable performance in 2018 elections, polling 1.6 million votes (35%) of the votes, as opposed to a mere 600 000 votes for all other parties and independent candidates, including the MDC-T. Nelson Chamisa obtained 2,151,927 votes (44.4%) as opposed to a mere 45,626 votes (0.94%) for Thokozani Khupe. Despite this clear political reality, the faction around Khupe has gone to court, obtained an order nullifying Chamisa’s elections as party president, probably illegally occupied the party offices, and recalled MPs, giving ZANU-PF an unassailable two-thirds majority. Since ZANU-PF now seeks to amend the Constitution in 27 different ways, the Khupe faction is seen increasingly as a stalking horse for ZANU-PF.

There can be little doubt where citizens’ allegiance lies in respect of the two MDC factions, but this has not stopped the internecine warfare, and the near-immobilisation of both parties as an effective opposition.

The other factor is, of course, the unresolved issues around the political violence of the 1980s in the southern half of the country, the so-called Gukurahundi. After years of silence, the demands for redress have grown ever more vociferous after the coup, beginning with a series of public debates fostered by the SAPES Trust. Whilst this may well not have been an ethnic move more than a political strategy in the 1980s, it has taken on a wholly ethnic complexion since.

Much more could be said about divisions within the country, and especially the rural-urban divide, but it is sufficient to point out that Zimbabwe is the most polarised country in Africa according to the [Afrobarometer](#).

Group Grievances are another source of problems for Zimbabwe, Gukurahundi being paramount amongst many. However, the political violence of the last 20 years is yet another source of grievances, and the unknown number of victims of mostly government-sponsored and condoned political violence, particularly around elections, remains an unhealed sore. Recent moves by the government to address Gukurahundi are creating more problems, with Matabeleland civil society groupings splitting over the appropriateness of the government’s approach.

The overall number of victims of all the past violence is unknown, but it is sufficient here to note that, of all Southern African countries governed by former liberation movements, since their full independence, Zimbabwe is the most violent. Certainly, [the reports of human rights](#) organisations suggest the numbers are considerable.

Conclusion

Looking at Zimbabwe in this way gives a clearer picture than merely looking at economy and politics in a narrow fashion. Zimbabwe in the SADC region lies like an open sore, bleeding its

people and its resources, and every previous little possibility of healing, in 2008, 2013 and even 2017, proves inadequately palliative. This is being made much worse by the Covid crisis, although this is merely another form of adversity that the government will be unable to manage, and currently is not managing at all well.

Thus, it seems indisputable that Zimbabwe is “fragile”, and the rhetoric about sanctions, neo-liberal imperialism and unpatriotic opposition forces cannot escape this fact. Zimbabwe is not in armed conflict or civil war, but, as seen above, arrives at this point through bad governance and broken politics. The big question going forward is how will the country get out of the mess it is in, what effect it will have on its neighbourhood, and what will the neighbours do? Even more seriously, will Zimbabwe slide from fragility into a failed state?

The most serious concern for the transition into failed state will be the possibility of yet another coup, with Mali providing a current example, and here the worrying prospect of junior officers losing patience with the military-party elite’s inability to resolve the economic crisis. There is also the worrying prospect of the civil service in its generality, not merely doctors and teachers, downing tools and the state becoming totally dysfunctional. It is interesting that an analysis of Zimbabwe’s fragility carried out in 2019 provided a series of scenarios and it would appear that the worst case scenario is materialising:⁴

Given the ongoing dry season and previous year’s drought combined with the restricted access to public services, most specifically water and sanitation services, an outbreak of a water borne disease such as cholera or dysentery occurs in the suburbs of Harare. This sets off a cascade of failure as health care workers, dismissed from their jobs, are not available to treat cases, resulting in an epidemic requiring international humanitarian intervention. This situation, combined with severe food scarcity in rural areas, leads to a retrenchment of public support for the regime in rural strongholds. MDC-A leader Nelson Chamisa makes good on his promise to scale up opposition rallies and protests leading to police or military repressive action against peaceful protestors in an effort to dispel the resistance. Protests spread to smaller towns and the military, directed by the Vice President Constantine Chiwenga, responds with force, killing protesters. The public use of the military against citizens leads to the re-imposition of the sanctions from European trading partners and reduces corporate interest in investment, cutting the regime off from new revenue streams. Government inability to respond to the crisis and lack of administrative capacity will be magnified, and this will further erode the people’s waning trust in the ZANU-PF government and galvanize the opposition, seriously testing state legitimacy.(Lamarche, Toyce & Wishart. 2019. 13)

Of course, this was the worst case anticipated in the absence of any knowledge about Covid-19, and indeed thinking about the scenarios knowing about Covid-19 might have changed many of the authors’ conclusions, but it does seem that Zimbabwe has fulfilled the conditions of this worst case.

However, the citizenry is mindful of the problems and posed various solutions. One has been the call for a National Transitional Authority, put forward in 2016 by the Platform for Concerned Citizens (PCC) and continuously pushed since then. This not an isolated opinion, echoed even by [South African analysts](#). The other is the call for a Comprehensive National

⁴Lamarche, C, Toyce, H & Wishart, A (2019), *The Country that Cannot Collapse. Fragility Analysis of Zimbabwe: Policy Recommendations for USAID*. December 2019. Carleton University & NPSIA. [\[https://carleton.ca/cifp/wp-content/uploads/Zimbabwe-Fragility-Brief-2020.pdf\]](https://carleton.ca/cifp/wp-content/uploads/Zimbabwe-Fragility-Brief-2020.pdf)

Settlement advocated by the National Convergence Platform (NCP), a broad coalition of churches, labour and civil society organisations, launched in December 2019. Perhaps the emergence of a “third voice” will prompt better regional and international engagement and stop the drift to a failed state?

There are already some moves to address the crisis. The South African government has sent envoys, and even the AU has made comment. However, the emergence of the “third voice” has been given impetus by the Zimbabwe government itself with an intemperate attack of the Catholic Bishops, the arrests of journalists, attacks on opposition party officials and civil society activists, and even the harassment of respected lawyers. All of this has placed Zimbabwe back on the international stage, and scarcely a day goes by without another statement or meeting about the Zimbabwe crisis. Most telling of all, perhaps, is the statement of a senior South African government official, Lindiwe Zulu, that there is a crisis in Zimbabwe. The hope will be that this attention stops the slide to failed state.

There should be no illusions about how difficult it will be even to overcome the fragility, especially if the important fundamentals of governance – constitutionalism, rule of law, and observance of human rights are quickly addressed. However, beyond this is the important task of undoing state capture, security sector reform, enforcing the separation of powers, removing high-level corruption, and, above all, creating a sustainable economic policy. Realistically, it is back to the drawing board of state design.