



**enough**

The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

# Zimbabwe

## Roots of the Crisis

Once the breadbasket of southern Africa, and a major exporter of food to its neighbors, Zimbabwe has descended into an economic and social nightmare under the authoritarian rule of President Robert Mugabe. A one-time hero of the liberation struggle, Mugabe has traded the aspirations of Zimbabweans for his perpetual hold on power, embracing the same repressive and tyrannical tactics once used by white settlers. The result has been complete economic collapse and a worsening political crisis marked by widespread violence against civilians.

---

### Rhodesia and the Liberation Struggle

In 1890, Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company established a white settler colony in the territory currently known as Zimbabwe. Successive white governments systematically used racial segregation to consolidate power, evicting indigenous people from fertile land and moving them to arid and inhospitable reserves.

In November 1965, wary of the British decision to give back control of neighboring colonies to their indigenous populations, the Rhodesian Front Government of Ian Smith proclaimed the colony independent. Although Britain did not accept Rhodesia's independence, it did not intervene to prevent it. This triggered a decade-long guerilla war by black nationalist groups against Smith's government. Over the next decade, two movements emerged: Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union, or ZANU, and the Zimbabwe African People's Union, or ZAPU. From bases in Zambia and Mozambique, they fought a bloody war against the Rhodesian state, which was supported by the apartheid regime in South Africa. Despite holding liberation as common goal, there was distrust and rivalry between ZANU and ZAPU, as well as instances of outright fighting.

By 1979, the conflict had killed 36,000 and displaced approximately 1.5 million people. Between Rhodesia's loss of support from South Africa, and the increasing division between ZANU and ZAPU, a negotiated settlement to the conflict appeared feasible. British-hosted negotiations in 1979 led to the Lancaster House Agreement, which returned Zimbabwe to black rule.

---

### Post-Independence Zimbabwe

In February 1980, ZANU leader Robert Mugabe was elected Prime Minister. During his first years in office, Mugabe was surprisingly conciliatory on the international stage. He worked to reassure white Zimbabweans and international diplomats that he would not govern as a revolutionary. Considerable international aid flowed to Zimbabwe during this period. However,

Mugabe took a very tough line toward internal dissent. When dissident supporters of ZAPU took up arms in Matabeleland, the government, suspicious of South African support for the rebels, launched a brutal counter-insurgency campaign. This campaign quickly took on ethnic overtones. ZANU drew most of its support from the Shona population, while ZAPU was Ndebele-based. Government forces—particularly the former guerillas of the 5 Brigade—made little effort to differentiate between ZAPU insurgents and the Ndebele people as a whole, and indiscriminate government attacks claimed thousands of lives.

---

## From Opposition to State Collapse

Zimbabwe's precipitous decline began in 1999, when the once prosperous southern African nation entered a political stalemate. President Mugabe held a referendum on a constitutional amendment which would have greatly expanded his powers. Mugabe and his ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front, or ZANU-PF, had never lost an election, but the referendum was defeated by a new opposition party formed from the labor union movement, the Movement for Democratic Change, or MDC, and its leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

Months after the defeat of the referendum, the MDC ran a candidate in every parliamentary district in the country, and emerged with nearly half of the directly elected seats in Parliament. ZANU-PF responded by beginning a campaign of political violence meant to intimidate the MDC. Simultaneously, the government politicized the long unresolved issue of landownership by empowering so-called war veteran militias to invade and occupy commercial farms owned mostly by white farmers. A plan was then instituted calling for commercial farmland to be given to landless black Zimbabweans. In reality, farms went to government officials unable or unwilling to operate them properly.

As a result of the land reform program, Zimbabwe's agricultural production—at one time the envy of many African nations—plummeted, with the country now producing 50 percent of the pre-2000 output. Shortages of food and fuel became commonplace, and inflation increased to the highest rate in the world—231 million percent as of October 2008. Foreign investors backed out of Zimbabwe due to political instability, and threats of nationalization of industries. No group suffered more from Mugabe's plans to seize farms than black commercial farm workers who saw their means of living simply disappear. Thousands and thousands of black farm worker families were left destitute and politically disenfranchised.

The MDC built support on a platform of ending political violence and improving the economy. In response, the government cracked down even harder on civil liberties. The government, which already had a monopoly on broadcast media, passed a new law that led to the closing of all major independent newspapers. Journalists, including foreign correspondents, were required to register with the government. New public order laws prevented public assembly absent police approval, severely limiting the MDC's ability to campaign.

ZANU-PF used violence and intimidation to win a widely condemned presidential election in 2002, and used more violence as well as the new anti-democratic laws to win another condemned election three years later. Internal tensions within the MDC and the threat of wholesale violence made effective opposition to Mugabe all the more difficult. Since the early 2000s, the political stalemate has continued, and almost all of Zimbabwe's key economic indicators have

become abysmal. Meanwhile, the MDC focused on unified presidential and parliamentary elections in 2008. ZANU-PF's tactics of violence, intimidation, and anti-democratic practices were expected. Its losses were not.

---

## The 2008 Elections and the Current Crisis

In early 2008, Mugabe called early elections, but for the first time faced a challenge from within ZANU-PF from a former finance minister, Simon Makoni. On March 29, 2008 combined presidential and parliamentary elections took place. Despite substantial pre-polling manipulation, the MDC won control of parliament. Furthermore, its leader and presidential candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai, received more votes than Mugabe. The outcome was clouded in controversy, as the government claimed that Tsvangirai received less than 50 percent of votes, and that a runoff was in order. In the period leading up to runoff elections on June 20, the government unleashed a nationwide campaign of violence against opposition groups. Tsvangirai pulled out shortly before the runoff, claiming that a free and fair election was impossible under the circumstances. In September 2008, a power-sharing agreement was reached, but implementation has stalled over the distribution of ministries. Mugabe and his allies appear intent on clinging to power no matter the catastrophic consequences for the people of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe's inflation rate has climbed to catastrophic levels due to extreme government corruption and exchange rate manipulation, with a single loaf of bread now costing millions and millions of Zimbabwean dollars.

---

---

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, Chad, eastern Congo, northern Uganda, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Enough's strategy papers and briefings provide sharp field analysis and targeted policy recommendations based on a "3P" crisis response strategy: promoting durable peace, providing civilian protection, and punishing perpetrators of atrocities. Enough works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve these crises. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to [www.enoughproject.org](http://www.enoughproject.org).

---

---

