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How South Africa Can Nudge Zimbabwe toward Stability

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What's new? As Zimbabwe's political and economic crises worsen, South Africa is moving beyond its policy of "quiet diplomacy" with its northern neighbour and applying more pressure on Harare to open up political space and reform its economy.

Why does it matter? With Zimbabwe's people slipping further into destitution, crackdowns fostering a growing sense of grievance within the opposition, and political divisions pitting ruling-party members against one another, the country could tip into even greater crisis through mass unrest or another coup.

What should be done? Pretoria should press Harare to halt repression and start dialogue with the political opposition to address Zimbabwe's economic woes. It should work with Washington on a roadmap for reforms that the U.S. and others can use to guide decisions on reversing sanctions and supporting debt relief for Zimbabwe.

I. Overview

Three years after a coup ended Robert Mugabe's rule, the situation in Zimbabwe has gone from bad to worse, as political tensions mount, the economy falls apart and the population faces hunger and COVID-19. Having signalled a desire to stabilise the economy and ease repression, President Emmerson Mnangagwa has disappointed. The state is arresting opponents who protest government corruption and incompetence. Meanwhile, government-allied businessmen are tightening their grip on what is left of the economy, while citizens cope with austerity measures and soaring inflation. Violence and lawlessness are on the rise. Fearing major unrest, or even another coup sparked by ruling-party divisions, Zimbabwe's most important neighbour, South Africa, is ditching its tolerant posture toward Harare. It should go further, pushing Mnangagwa to roll back repression and begin dialogue with the opposition on economic reform. Pretoria could meanwhile work out reform benchmarks with Western governments, which would be guideposts for when to support the lifting of sanctions and extend debt relief for Zimbabwe.

South Africa has been a key mediator in Zimbabwe's political crises for years. In 2008, it brokered a national unity government in the country following international outrage at violence that followed Mugabe's refusal to accept his first-round election defeat by Morgan Tsvangirai, then the opposition leader. The deal, midwived by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, was celebrated by South African offi-

cials at the time as vindication of Pretoria's "quiet diplomacy" with Mugabe, whom South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) still viewed as a liberation icon. But it infuriated many Zimbabweans, who saw the policy as appeasing a repressive strongman. Moreover, despite its economic and diplomatic clout with Zimbabwe, and its role as a guarantor of the 2008 agreement, South Africa failed to hold Mugabe to his promises when Zimbabwe's ruling African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) flouted the unity accord, allowing Mugabe to consolidate power and win re-election in 2013. He proceeded to rule unchallenged until the November 2017 coup.

Three years after Mugabe's ouster, ZANU-PF clings to power under Mnangagwa. Following the 2018 election, contested as fraudulent by the Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A) opposition party, Zimbabwe's government has stepped up repression amid an economic freefall and mounting social problems in a way that could propel the country toward renewed conflict. Beyond arresting its opponents, it accuses them of promoting a violent regime change agenda at the behest of foreign interests. Moreover, despite Mnangagwa's promise of sweeping economic reforms, ZANU-PF elites and some of their military allies have cornered much of the economy, profiting handsomely while ordinary Zimbabweans face public spending cuts, skyrocketing prices and the COVID-19 pandemic. As socio-economic tensions rise, so, too, has violent crime, with street gangs increasingly prevalent, some of them co-opted by rival ZANU-PF factions at a time when ruling-party unity is itself coming under strain.

Under Cyril Ramaphosa's presidency, which began in 2018, the South African government has begun to take more active steps to address the risk that continual cycles of repression and economic failure could deliver a destabilising crisis on its doorstep. In the last eighteen months, Pretoria has become noticeably more critical of ZANU-PF's mishandling of Zimbabwe's governance, calling out systemic corruption and capture of state assets by ruling elites in Harare. But while Pretoria has appointed envoys to travel to Harare to encourage dialogue between ZANU-PF and MDC-A, as well as with other political and civil society actors, its efforts have yielded no fruit, in part because authorities in Zimbabwe blocked the emissaries' attempts to meet opposition leaders. Without a political compact between ZANU-PF and MDC-A, the chances of meaningful reform that could open up the economy, ease political tensions and lead to a roadmap for clean elections down the road will dwindle.

Pretoria should not give up. Ramaphosa's government should use its influence as Zimbabwe's most important neighbour and trading partner to keep pressing Harare to dial back repression and to demonstrate commitment to real dialogue with the opposition. Pretoria must insist that Harare give its envoys space to engage with MDC-A and other opposition and civil society figures so that it can bring them to the table for talks. It should then push ZANU-PF and MDC-A to enter negotiations about how to strengthen the auditing of government finances and tackle high-level corruption, as a first step toward stopping the plunder of state assets by unaccountable elites and resetting economic governance.

Meanwhile, Pretoria should reach out to the U.S., European Union (EU) and UK and work with them to develop a credible roadmap for reform in Zimbabwe, which could be linked to decisions about lifting sanctions and encouraging international financial institutions to reschedule debt or extend new lines of credit to resuscitate Zimbabwe's moribund economy. By arming Pretoria with incentives to motivate Harare, donors can help position it to nudge its neighbour down the long-elusive path toward political and economic reform.

II. Repression and Recession in a Crisis-prone State

The ouster of former President Robert Mugabe in November 2017 raised hopes that Zimbabwe would embark on much-needed reforms to protect political freedoms, end government repression and revitalise an ailing economy. When Emmerson Mnangagwa, Mugabe's long-term ally and one-time vice president, took power after the coup, he promised "radical economic reforms".¹ He also stated the country was under a "new dispensation", raising hopes he would hold free and fair elections and stop systematic abuses of opposition activists and politicians.² But hope swiftly gave way to disappointment as Mnangagwa cracked down on protesters challenging his victory in the 2018 election, which were criticised by foreign observers for being less than free and fair.³ Once in office, he fell back on draconian legislation governing public order and media freedoms to muzzle opponents.⁴ As the clampdown continued, the economy also went from bad to worse. Internal ZANU-PF divisions also widened amid a slew of government corruption scandals.

¹ "Mnangagwa pledges 'radical economic reforms' at inauguration", *Financial Times*, 26 August 2018.

² "A New Zimbabwe? Assessing Continuity and Change After Mugabe", Rand Corporation, 2020. At first, many Zimbabwean and foreign analysts believed that Mnangagwa was serious about reform. Crisis Group interviews and correspondence, Western diplomats, international financial institution representatives, independent experts, January-July 2018.

³ See "IRI/NDI Zimbabwe International Election Observation Mission Final Report", International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute, October 2018. The report concluded: "While some significant incremental improvements were demonstrated in the 2018 elections, Zimbabwe has not yet established a process that treats all political parties equitably and allows citizens to be confident that they can cast their vote and express their political opinion free from fear of retribution. Consequently, Zimbabwe's democratic trajectory is not certain, and the international community should remain vigilant and engaged in supporting the people's call for a genuine transition". See also "EU Election Observers Final Report Zimbabwe 2018", October 2018.

⁴ Zimbabwe has a history of using legislation for repressive purposes. Under Mnangagwa, Zimbabwe has repealed the Public Order Security Act and Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, which Mugabe used to quash political opposition and free speech. But the authorities continue to use new laws, such as the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act, Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act, as well as regulations to police COVID-19, to restrict political space. In addition, the government intends to introduce legislation, including a cybersecurity and data protection bill and a so-called Patriot Bill that it could use to criminalise opposition and civil society activities. "Zimbabwe's looming Patriot Bill cause for great concern", Media Institute for Southern Africa, 14 October 2020. Crisis Group interviews, Zimbabwean legal experts, 4 November 2020.

A. *Repression and Economic Woes*

Zimbabwe's crisis has only deepened since the 31 July 2018 presidential election. On 1 August, security forces opened fire on crowds protesting the conduct of the polls, the first time in Zimbabwe's history that either policemen or soldiers had used live ammunition against peaceful demonstrators. Six people died. MDC-A rejected Mnangagwa's narrow election victory, claiming irregularities in vote counting, but the Constitutional Court dismissed its legal challenge.⁵ MDC-A, which enjoys sizeable support in cities, has continued to refuse to recognise Mnangagwa as the elected president. It has also boycotted the Political Actors Dialogue, set up by the government in February 2019 in what it said was an effort to bring together political leaders to debate the national crisis. The opposition party argues that ZANU-PF is using the dialogue platform to present itself in a conciliatory light while it continues to treat its opponents brutally.⁶

Amid the political crisis, the country's economy has nosedived.⁷ The government says its major economic reform effort – the Transition Stabilisation Program launched in October 2018 – has delivered macro-economic stability.⁸ But critics have ample reason to dispute this claim, pointing to a currency devaluation crisis, rampant inflation, ballooning unemployment, widespread poverty and pervasive food insecurity.⁹ Government targets of 9 per cent growth for 2019 were wildly optimistic, as the economy in fact contracted by 12.8 per cent.¹⁰ In February 2020, the International Monetary Fund concluded that its Staff-Monitored Program, introduced to assist the government with the 2018 Transitional Stabilization Program, was "off track" and that there had been an "uneven implementation of reforms, notably delays and missteps in foreign exchange and monetary reforms".¹¹

⁵ "Zimbabwe court rejects opposition challenge to Mnangagwa victory", *Financial Times*, 24 August 2018. The court delivered its final written judgment only in November 2019.

⁶ Besides ZANU-PF, the Political Actors Dialogue comprises 2018 presidential candidates from over a dozen minority parties that collectively represent less than 5 per cent of the electorate. Crisis Group correspondence, Zimbabwe analyst, 9 August 2020; Crisis Group telephone interview, MDC-A official, 29 October 2020.

⁷ "Zimbabwe's economy in steep contraction as inflation hits 300%", *Business Day*, 26 September 2020; "Zimbabwe in 'economic and humanitarian crisis' as IMF sounds alarm", *CNBC*, 3 March 2020; "3 years after Mugabe overthrow, many Zimbabweans lives worse", *Al Jazeera*, 14 November 2020.

⁸ According to the government, the Transitional Stabilization Program, due to end in December 2020, has put in place a foundation of macro-economic stability that the country can now build upon with a two-phase ten-year National Development Strategy. That strategy, in turn, is to usher in an upper middle-income economy by 2030. "Progress on Economic and Structural Reforms in Zimbabwe", presentation by Mthuli Ncube, minister of finance and economic development, 20 August 2020; "Blueprint to lay ground for sustainable growth – minister", *The Herald*, 4 November 2020.

⁹ "IMF Managing Director Approves a Staff-Monitored Program for Zimbabwe", press release, International Monetary Fund, 31 May 2019; "Review of the Transitional Stabilisation Programme", Labour and Economic Development Research Institute of Zimbabwe, 20 August 2020. Crisis Group correspondence, Zimbabwean economist, 5 November 2020.

¹⁰ "African Economic Outlook 2020: Developing Africa's Workforce for the Future", African Development Bank, January 2020, p. 189.

¹¹ "IMF Executive Board Concludes 2020 Article IV Consultation with Zimbabwe", press release, International Monetary Fund, 26 February 2020; "State firms privatisation drags", *The Herald*, 6 April 2020.

As the economy collapses, social tensions are mounting, seemingly exacerbated by the stabilisation program. While sold to the public as a reform package that would stabilise Zimbabwe's economy and promote foreign investment, the program has not delivered on its key promises, including state-owned enterprise reform, infrastructure development and turning the tide on corruption. At the same time, it has exacerbated economic hardship for ordinary Zimbabweans.¹² Painful cuts in public spending have hit public-sector workers hard; many public servants are unable even to afford the commute to work.¹³ Strikes by teachers, nurses and doctors protesting the drop in their purchasing power have taken a toll on the health and education sectors. A very steep devaluation of the country's currency also resulted in higher costs for imported goods.¹⁴ As restrictions on the use of foreign exchange have also kicked in and the currency is in a state of collapse, inflation, running at over 600 per cent, has further emptied the pockets of civil servants and other ordinary Zimbabweans.¹⁵

With political and social tensions mounting, and criminal violence on the rise, the government has continued to use brute force to stamp out dissent. In January 2019, protests – some of which spilled over into violent looting sprees – erupted across Zimbabwe after the government massively hiked fuel prices.¹⁶ The subsequent crackdown left thirteen dead and over 1,000 arrested, amid widespread allegations of beatings, abductions, torture and rape by security forces.¹⁷ According to human rights monitors, state security agents or sub-contracted thugs have subsequently continued to engage in these abuses.¹⁸ A series of arrests of political opposition, trade union and civil society leaders on charges of subversion and treason followed as the next phase of the crackdown, though none of the charges have stuck in court.¹⁹ Meanwhile,

¹² "Way past time to privatise SOEs", *Zimbabwe Independent*, 23 October 2020; "Zimbabwe's privatisation push stutters along", *FDI Intelligence*, 13 June 2019; "Reviewing govt's TSP", *Zimbabwe Independent*, 24 October 2019; "Austerity measures: Is Zim drinking poisoned chalice", *Newsday*, 20 August 2019; "Austerity first", *Africa Confidential*, 31 May 2019.

¹³ "Incapacitated: the tale of Zimbabwean workers and teachers", *The FeedZw*, 8 October 2020; Tafadzwa Choto, "Fighting for a living wage in Zimbabwe", *ROAPE*, 1 October 2020.

¹⁴ In October 2018, the Zimbabwean dollar was pegged at parity to the U.S. dollar. By February 2019, authorities devalued the currency to 2.5 Zimbabwean dollars to \$1. By June 2020, authorities introduced a foreign exchange auction system that saw the rate plummet to 80 Zimbabwean dollars to \$1. The black-market rate hovers around 110 Zimbabwean dollars to \$1. "Biti says RBZ forex auction system a charade, headed for collapse", *New Zimbabwe*, 26 November 2020.

¹⁵ Crisis Group correspondence, Zimbabwean economist, 5 November 2020.

¹⁶ "Fuel price protests in Zimbabwe turn deadly", *Reuters*, 14 January 2019.

¹⁷ Piers Pigou, "Revolt and Repression in Zimbabwe", *Crisis Group Commentary*, 18 January 2019.

¹⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, Zimbabwean human rights expert, 4 November 2020. Zimbabwe has a long history of activist disappearances, with hundreds of abductions recorded over the last two decades and over two hundred activists murdered during the 2008 elections. See Lloyd Sachikonye, *When a State Turns on Its Citizens: 60 Years of Institutionalised Violence in Zimbabwe* (Johannesburg, 2011). In late July and early August 2020, several activists were abducted and tortured in connection with planned anti-corruption protests. For details, see "Zimbabwe must end the politics of abductions", *263Chat*, 12 October 2020; and "106 abduction and torture operations: Mnangagwa redeploys Ferret Force, Jonathan Moyo reveals", *My Zimbabwe*, 15 October 2020. ZANU-PF has routinely denied these allegations, however. See "Zimbabwe's ruling party denies abducting activists", *SABC News*, 29 August 2020. Some of those making the allegations have now been charged with faking their ordeals. See "Zimbabwe opposition trio charged with lying over torture denied bail", *News 24*, 15 June 2020.

¹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Zimbabwean legal expert, 5 November 2020.

criminal violence, primarily perpetrated by desperate unemployed men joining machete gangs, is spiking.²⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic, beyond exposing the Zimbabwean health system's endemic failings, has deepened the country's political and economic crisis.²¹ Lock-down measures taken to fight the disease have hurt the economy.²² The police and military have also been using coronavirus-related restrictions as a pretext to target opposition members and supporters engaging in peaceful protest for arrest.²³ In July 2020, authorities clamped down on government critics, including by arresting opposition leader Jacob Ngarivhume for organising protests and by incarcerating Booker Prize-shortlisted writer Tsitsi Dangarembga for attending demonstrations.²⁴ The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reacted with a statement emphasising that Zimbabwe should not use COVID-19 "to clamp down on fundamental freedoms, including freedom of speech and the right to peaceful assembly".²⁵

B. Sanctions

Officials in Harare portray the country's economic crisis as the combined result of drought and sanctions levied by Western governments. They point in particular to measures imposed by the U.S., as well as by the EU, the UK, Australia and Canada. These measures range from an arms sales ban to denial of visas to Zimbabwean officials to financial sanctions targeted at individuals and commercial entities designated for their role in corruption and rights abuses.²⁶ In addition, the Zimbabwe Democracy

²⁰ "The New Deception: What Has Changed? A Baseline Study on the Record of Zimbabwe's 'New Dispensation' in Upholding Human Rights", Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, August 2019; "Violent gun crimes on the rise in Zimbabwe", eNCA, 18 October 2020; "Machete violence: militias now for hire", *The Standard*, 26 January 2020; Grasian Mkodzongi, "The Rise of 'MaShurugwi' Machete Gangs and Violent Conflicts in Zimbabwe's Artisanal and Small-scale Gold Mining Sector", *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 22 October 2020. Crisis Group Africa Report N°294, *All That Glitters is Not Gold: Turmoil in Zimbabwe's Mining Sector*, 24 November 2020.

²¹ See "COVID-19 exposes Zimbabwe's heart-rending health crisis", Medical Brief, 19 August 2020; "COVID-19 worsens Zimbabwe's health crisis", *The Lancet*, 15 August 2020.

²² In July, the government tightened restrictions on movement, introducing a dusk-to-dawn curfew. It has slowly eased the curfew, and by late October the constraints applied only from 10pm to 6am.

²³ "Coronavirus: Zimbabwe arrests 100,000 for 'violation' of measures", BBC, 19 July 2020; "Zimbabwe activists decry 'unprecedented clampdown' after arrests", Al Jazeera, 8 August 2020.

²⁴ See "Tsitsi Dangarembga – Booker Prize nominee arrested in Zimbabwe", BBC, 31 July 2020. See also "Zimbabwe politician who called for protests denied bail for third time", Reuters, 21 August 2020.

²⁵ "UN warns Zimbabwe against using the pandemic for clampdown", News 24, 24 July 2020.

²⁶ "Sanctions meant to weaken Zim", *The Herald*, 20 October 2020; "Zimbabwe's Mhangagwa blames woes on 'US' thugs", Dispatch Live, 5 August 2020. The U.S. has the widest set of measures in place, targeting 84 individuals and 56 entities, most of which are either farms or businesses related to the named individuals. See "U.S Sanctions Policy: Facts and Myths", U.S. Embassy to Zimbabwe, n.d. Since the 2017 coup, the U.S. has added three individuals to the list: retired Lieutenant General Anselem Sanyatwe, who commanded the security detail that killed protesters in Harare on 1 August 2018; Owen Ncube, Zimbabwe's state security minister; and most recently, Kuda Tagwirei, a politically connected businessman and ZANU-PF financier who is accused of enabling widespread corruption. "The United States imposes sanctions on Zimbabwean businessman Kudakwashe Tagwirei", press statement, U.S. State Department, 5 August 2020. By contrast, the U.S. has shown it is ready to lift at least some sanctions when persuaded that maintaining them would inflict more punishment on Zimbabwe's people than on ZANU-PF. In May 2020, for example, Washington lifted sanc-

and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA), passed by the U.S. Congress in 2001 and amended in 2018, mandates U.S. authorities to vote against Harare's access to new lines of credit from international financial institutions until it carries out key governance, electoral and human rights reforms.²⁷

Mnangagwa and his supporters portray these sanctions as punishing the Zimbabwean people, saying they have a chilling effect on investors, who avoid the country altogether rather than risk running afoul of them, and have made borrowing on the commercial market unaffordable for banks. The upshot, the government argues, is that "the average Zimbabwean pays the heaviest price".²⁸ Western governments argue that this claim is an exaggeration; they say the sanctions target elite economic actors and maintain that if Zimbabwean banks cannot borrow cheaply, it is a result of poor governance in Harare.²⁹ U.S. officials also say ZDERA provisions have not come into play, because Zimbabwe's debt arrears prevent it from obtaining loans from international financial institutions whatever Washington's position.³⁰

C. ZANU-PF Divisions

As Zimbabwe falls further into an economic abyss, fractures are also opening in ZANU-PF power circles. One fault line is between groups loyal to Mnangagwa and those that oppose him, including followers of Constantino Chiwenga, his deputy. Chiwenga is a former army general who led the 2017 coup against Mugabe and is now reportedly positioning himself to challenge for the party leadership ahead of the 2023 elections.³¹

tions levied against the Zimbabwean Agribank and the Infrastructure and Development Bank of Zimbabwe. See "Agribank, IDZ Removed from U.S. Sanctions List", *New Zimbabwe*, 22 May 2020. Active EU targeted sanctions remain only against Grace Mugabe, widow of the former president, and Zimbabwe Defence Industries. Switzerland also imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe in 2002 in the form of an arms embargo on the state, as well as financial and travel restrictions on President Mugabe and around twenty members of his entourage. From 2013 onward, Bern maintained financial and travel restrictions solely on Mugabe, his wife and the state-owned defence company. For details on the UK sanctions, see "UK Sanctions on Zimbabwe", Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 22 May 2019.

²⁷ Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act of 2001 and Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Amendment Act of 2018. See also "U.S Sanctions Policy: Facts and Myths", op. cit.
²⁸ "Sanctions have a chilling effect on businesses", *Sunday Mail*, 18 October 2020. See also tweet by President of Zimbabwe, @edmnangagwa, 12:09pm, 25 October 2019.

²⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Western diplomats, 14 March, 24 April and 12 May 2020. See also "Zimbabwe: corruption and patronage do more damage than sanctions", *The Africa Report*, 25 October 2019.

³⁰ "US Ambassador Brian A. Nichols in Conversation with Trevor", video, YouTube, 21 October 2019.

³¹ See "Meet the force behind Zimbabwe's 'crocodile' president", EWN, 30 December 2017; and Crisis Group Commentary, "Zimbabwe's Very Peculiar Coup", 16 November 2017. Media speculation about the rift between the Mnangagwa and Chiwenga camps has been bubbling for over two years. See "Infighting between Mnangagwa and Chiwenga factions frustrating eager investors", Reuters, 14 July 2018; "Rifts at the top rattle Zimbabwe after Mugabe", Voice of America, 23 August 2018. These tensions reportedly worsened during 2019 and into 2020. See "Zimbabwean president denies rift with deputy Chiwenga", *Zimbabwe Independent*, 1 February 2019; "'Deep concern' over Zimbabwe's deteriorating political, economic situation", *The South African*, 30 August 2020; and "Mnangagwa, Chiwenga fight turns nasty", *Zimbabwe Independent*, 19 September 2020.

The two factions share the common objective of keeping ZANU-PF in office, but the tensions between them are rising.³²

Evidence of such division is mounting. In July 2020, for example, party spokesman Patrick Chinamasa said ZANU-PF had suspended two politburo members after State Security Minister Owen Ncube reported that posters and fliers praising Chiwenga and calling for Mnangagwa's removal were found in their homes.³³ Chinamasa also claimed that unnamed external forces were "working with certain individuals in the party's senior ranks to destabilise internal cohesion".³⁴

D. *Corruption Scandals*

Amid these tensions, numerous corruption scandals have tarnished top officials, revealing the extent of misgovernance and the limits of Zimbabwe's institutions in dealing with high-level graft. While the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC), which installed its new chairperson in July 2019, has arrested and charged several ministers and senior officials amid the president's claims that he is taking a "zero tolerance" approach to corruption, prosecutors have yet to deliver a conviction. In turn, critics have argued that, despite the ZACC initiative, the president and his allies in the legal system are more interested in using the probes to keep senior ZANU-PF officials in check than in punishing them.³⁵ ZACC officials say they choose their targets independently but lack the resources to tackle all the most important cases.³⁶ Meanwhile, the ZACC has decided not to investigate Kudakwashe Tagwirei, a businessman close to Mnangagwa and Chiwenga, who benefitted from hundreds of millions of dollars in state payouts.³⁷ Washington has now sanctioned Tagwirei for "public corruption".³⁸

³² Crisis Group telephone interview, Zimbabwe security sector expert, 2 September 2020; Crisis Group correspondence, former government minister, 6 November 2020.

³³ Patrick Smith and Frank Chikowore, "Zimbabwe: the Mnangagwa squad", *The Africa Report*, 6 November 2020.

³⁴ See "Zanu-PF internal finger pointing as coup plot amount", *The Zimbabwe Mail*, 30 July 2020.

³⁵ See "Zimbabwe's Mnangagwa promises zero tolerance in corruption fight", Reuters, 20 December 2017. See also "Fighting graft remains a serious, complex challenge – president", *The Herald*, 11 July 2020. In July 2019, the ZACC arrested Tourism Minister Prisca Mupfumira and charged her with misusing \$95 million from the state pension fund. The trial has been delayed several times. See "Zimbabwe tourism minister charged with corruption worth \$95m", Voice of America, 26 July 2019. In August 2019, the ZACC arrested former Vice President Phelekezela Mphoko, a former rival to Mnangagwa. His trial, which has taken place in secret, started in September 2020, but has been postponed until January 2021. Crisis Group correspondence, journalist, 3 December 2020. See "Mphoko's trial continues in camera", *The Herald*, 15 September 2020. In November 2019, the ZACC also arrested a minister in the presidency, Joram Gumbo, for abuse of office costing the treasury \$3.7 million when he was transport minister. His trial has yet to start. See "Zimbabwe minister charged with corruption costing \$3.7m", Reuters, 4 November 2019. Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists, opposition politicians and Western diplomats, September-October 2020. These sources consistently refer to concerns that the arrests amount to a "catch and release" management strategy by Mnangagwa.

³⁶ "Zim corruption too big for ZACC to handle", *New Zimbabwe*, 11 February 2020. Crisis Group communication, ZACC official, 6 October 2020.

³⁷ "IMF warns Zimbabwe over payouts to Traftigura partner", *Financial Times*, 26 September 2019. The commission said the allegations against Tagwirei, made by ZANU-PF members whom the party subsequently disciplined and expelled, did not meet the (undisclosed) minimal threshold for inves-

At the same time, the government appears to be using another anti-corruption institution to target those who have exposed alleged corruption elsewhere. For example, the Special Anti-Corruption Unit, created in 2018 and run by Mnangagwa's nephew out of the office of the presidency, has reportedly been involved in arrests of individuals who were central to investigations of former Health Minister Obadiah Moyo. He was arrested in June 2020 following ZACC investigations into his alleged award of a contract for supply of COVID-19 personal protection equipment to a United Arab Emirates company, Drax International, without going to tender.³⁹ In July, prominent journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, who is credited with exposing the Drax deal, was arrested on charges of plotting to promote public violence.⁴⁰ Chin'ono alleges that the special unit is behind his arrest.⁴¹ The unit has also arrested police officers involved in the Drax investigation.⁴²

III. Pretoria Comes Knocking

Under the presidencies of Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008) and Jacob Zuma (2009-2018), South Africa maintained a policy of "quiet diplomacy" toward its northern neighbour. In practice, this policy meant generally abstaining from criticising Zimbabwe's governance and human rights record. Pretoria argued that this approach allowed it to build confidence and friendly influence with Harare, but many Zimbabweans criticise the strategy as a form of appeasement.⁴³ These criticisms resurfaced when Mnangagwa seized power and Pretoria demurred from labelling Mugabe's ouster as a "coup", despite the military's obvious intervention.⁴⁴ South Africa nonetheless maintained its posture well after Cyril Ramaphosa became president in February 2018. When Zimbabwean

tigation. Consequently, it undertook no enquiry. Tim E. Ndoro, "He is innocent: ZACC dismisses Kuda Tagwirei corruption allegations", iHarare, 2 March 2020.

³⁸ "IMF warns Zimbabwe over payouts to Trafigura partner", op. cit. See "The United States Imposes Sanctions on Zimbabwean Businessman Kudakwashe Tagwirei", op. cit.

³⁹ See "Zimbabwe minister Obadiah Moyo arrested", CGTN Africa, 19 June 2020; "Zimbabwe: Covid-19 drugs scandal lays bare the rot in the system", *The Africa Report*, 17 August 2020.

⁴⁰ See "Prominent Zimbabwe journalist arrested in Harare", *Financial Times*, 20 July 2020. Human rights groups have called for Chin'ono's release. "Zimbabwe: Authorities must use bail hearing to release journalist Hopewell Chin'ono", Amnesty International, 18 November 2020. See "Zimbabwe journalist: 'I was jailed a month after exposing corruption'", BBC, 11 October 2020.

⁴¹ "Mnangagwa's nephew behind arrests of regime critics – Chin'ono", *Politics 263*, 25 September 2020. Chin'ono's lawyers have also asked authorities to explain why he was brought to face hearings in an anti-corruption court in November. See "Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono remanded in custody on fresh charges", *Daily Maverick*, 5 November 2020.

⁴² "Detectives who exposed corruption arrested", Pindula, 26 September 2020. One of the detectives is accused of taking protection money from drug and illicit gold dealers. See "Corruption, top police detective arrested", *The Herald*, 25 September 2020.

⁴³ See "South Africa's 'silent' diplomacy", BBC, 5 March 2003. James Hamill and John Hoffman, "Quiet Diplomacy or Appeasement? South Africa's Policy Towards Zimbabwe", *The Round Table*, vol. 98 (June 2009); Liesl Louw Vaudren, "Thabo Mbeki's quietly destructive policy on Zimbabwe", Institute for Security Studies, 26 November 2014; Brian Kagoro, "Contextualising Zanu-PF, ANC talks: quiet diplomacy is dead", *Zimbabwe Independent*, 11 September 2020.

⁴⁴ "Why Mugabe isn't standing aside (or when a coup is not a coup)", *Time*, 17 November 2017. "Zimbabwe's Very Peculiar Coup", op. cit.

security forces opened fire on protesters on 1 August 2018, Pretoria was muted. Later that month, Zimbabwe's Constitutional Court dismissed an MDC-A petition contesting the election results, with South Africa endorsing the decision.⁴⁵ Pretoria also seemingly turned a blind eye to Harare's attack on protesters in January 2019.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, South Africa under Ramaphosa has gradually shifted its public stance regarding its neighbour's crisis, moving toward a more assertive and critical position.⁴⁷ "It has taken almost two decades for South Africa to appreciate [that] quiet diplomacy toward Zimbabwe has failed to secure results", says one South African official.⁴⁸

The first glimpse of Pretoria's shifting attitude toward Zimbabwe came during Ramaphosa's address to the Bi-National Commission in Harare in March 2019. Ramaphosa reflected on South Africa's own experience with "state capture" – a euphemism for entrenched institutional graft – in a passage that was widely interpreted as a coded signal to Mnangagwa to tackle corruption.⁴⁹ Pretoria followed up this veiled message in November 2019 with a much more direct statement. Foreign Affairs Minister Naledi Pandor argued that Zimbabwe's economic, political and social problems were inextricably linked, that they needed to be addressed simultaneously and that Harare should convene an inclusive national dialogue to determine how to do it.⁵⁰

The reasons for this shift are partly rooted in Pretoria's assessment that the status quo in Zimbabwe could be damaging for South Africa, especially if more social unrest leads to more Zimbabwean migrants fleeing into South African territory or another coup sets Zimbabwe on a path to even greater instability. In addition, Ramaphosa increasingly sees instability in Zimbabwe, the biggest importer of South African goods, as a brake on Pretoria's plans for economic integration of the Southern African Development Community, especially given that its northern neighbour lies at the region's geographic centre. Moreover, even at present levels of unrest, instability is pushing Zimbabwean citizens into South Africa, which feeds internal tensions that sometimes flare in acts of xenophobic violence.⁵¹

Fearing Zimbabwe's drift into crisis, Pretoria has stepped up attempts to facilitate a national political agreement that could steer the country off its disastrous trajectory.

⁴⁵ "Ramaphosa urges Zimbabweans to accept election ruling", SABC News, 25 August 2018.

⁴⁶ "Ramaphosa cannot stay silent on Zimbabwe", *Mail and Guardian*, 23 January 2019.

⁴⁷ This shift was part of a stated commitment to resuscitate vigorous action to achieve Pretoria's foreign policy goals on several fronts. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°152, *Four Conflict Prevention Opportunities for South Africa's Foreign Policy*, 27 March 2020.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Johannesburg, November 2020.

⁴⁹ "Opening Remarks by President Cyril Ramaphosa", SA-Zimbabwe Bi-National Commission, Harare, 12 March 2019. The two countries established a binational commission in April 2015 to consolidate existing cooperation and explore other domains where they could work together. Pretoria and Harare have signed 45 agreements in a range of areas from security to transport. Crisis Group interview, Zimbabwean political analyst, 9 June 2020.

⁵⁰ From Pandor's address at a symposium on "Best Path Towards a Prosperous Zimbabwe", UNISA, 18 November 2019.

⁵¹ J. Brooks Spector, "Could South Africa cope with a migration crisis like that of Syria", *Daily Maverick*, 18 January 2019. No one really knows how many Zimbabweans are in South Africa. Estimates range from 1.5 to three million. "How many Zimbabweans live in South Africa? The numbers are unreliable", Africa Check, 5 November 2013; "Zimbabweans in South Africa", South African Immigration, 25 July 2019; "South Africa: hatred of migrants reaches new levels", Deutsche Welle, 29 September 2020.

In December 2019, former President Mbeki travelled to Zimbabwe, where he met with President Mnangagwa, MDC-A leader Nelson Chamisa, other opposition leaders and civil society organisations, to explore appetites for an inclusive national dialogue.⁵² His attempt to get Mnangagwa and Chamisa in the same room fizzled, however, and Mbeki did not follow up on his promise to return to Harare, reportedly because Mnangagwa refused to answer his calls.⁵³ As relations between Pretoria and Harare soured, the South African ambassador to Zimbabwe, Mphakama Mbete, speaking at a meeting in Harare in February 2020, referred directly to Zimbabwe's governance problems and how they deter foreign investment.⁵⁴ Many interpreted these remarks as a message to Harare that Pretoria was fed up with quiet diplomacy.⁵⁵

Although South Africa subsequently turned to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, appearing to move concerns about Zimbabwe to the back burner, it did not do so for long. Harare's clampdowns on prominent critics in July 2020 drew international attention, including from Pretoria. Worried both about these reports and the prospect that more misgovernance and economic woes could lead to greater instability, Ramaphosa announced on 6 August that he was appointing two special envoys to work with Zimbabwe, dispatching them to Harare.⁵⁶ Mnangagwa, however, forbade these diplomats from meeting with opposition leaders as an ostensible matter of diplomatic protocol – a demand that appeared intended to kill any prospect of South African mediation between ZANU-PF and the opposition. The envoys have yet to make a subsequent visit to Harare.

Meanwhile, the ANC – which in addition to being South Africa's ruling party is a member of the Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa, to which ZANU-PF also belongs – likewise changed its stance toward Zimbabwe's crisis. On 31 August, the ANC's National Executive Committee adopted a resolution welcoming the South African government's initiatives to press Harare and highlighting the importance of engaging with all parties in Zimbabwe in order to help address the country's problems.⁵⁷

It was a major step for the ANC to break with liberation movement solidarity by raising its concerns publicly, and the ZANU-PF leadership appears to have been both

⁵² South African officials say Pretoria encouraged Mbeki's travel. Crisis Group interviews, South African officials, 30 January 2020. "Former South African President Mbeki's visit raises hopes for political dialogue in Zimbabwe", Xinhua, 17 December 2019; "Thabo Mbeki holds meetings with Zimbabwe political leaders as observers sound alarm over unity govt", Voice of America, 17 December 2019. It is unclear, however, in what capacity Mbeki was in Harare, with the Zimbabwean government claiming he was there at Harare's invitation, Mbeki telling some of those he met that he was acting in his own capacity and South African government sources indicating that he was in Harare conducting official government business. "Mbeki winds up Zim visit", *The Herald*, 19 December 2019. Crisis Group communication, civil society leader, March 2020.

⁵³ Peter Fabricius, "Thabo Mbeki's mediation role in Zimbabwe remains unclear", *Daily Maverick*, 27 March 2020.

⁵⁴ "SA ambassador lectures Zim on reforms, rule of law", Pindula, 22 February 2020.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews and communication, Western diplomat, Zimbabwean political analyst, March 2020.

⁵⁶ "President Cyril Ramaphosa appoints special envoys to Zimbabwe following recent reports of difficulties that the Republic of Zimbabwe is experiencing", press statement, South African Government, 6 August 2020. The envoys are Dr Sydney Mufamadi, a former minister who was part of Mbeki's Zimbabwe mediation team from 2007 to 2008, and Baleka Mbete, a former ANC chairperson.

⁵⁷ "Statement of the ANC National Executive Committee 28-30 August 2020", Department of Information and Publicity, ANC, 30 August 2020.

irritated and alarmed.⁵⁸ ZANU-PF quickly invited the ANC to Zimbabwe in an apparent attempt to influence the party's agenda and narrative. An ANC delegation visited on 9 September, but like Ramaphosa's envoys, it did not meet with any actors from the opposition or civil society.⁵⁹

IV. Nudging Zimbabwe toward Stability

Pretoria's move away from its traditional practice of addressing Harare's transgressions through "quiet diplomacy", together with the ANC's endorsement of the pivot, puts South Africa in a position to exert pressure on Zimbabwe's political leaders to ease repression and draw up a consensual roadmap to address the country's socio-economic woes.

Given the entrenched corruption at the top of the ZANU-PF government that risks sinking the country, it is clear that only a broader-based ruling coalition can create the kind of foundation for good governance that the country needs. South Africa and the ANC should thus maintain pressure on the government to enter talks with the opposition and civil society to review possible economic reforms that keep front and centre the interests of Zimbabwe's people and not just its ruling party.

Ideally, these talks would lead to an agreement to enhance controls on public finance as an initial measure to improve governance and help stabilise the economy and prepare the ground for broad-gauge measures. In public, Mnangagwa and MDC-A leader Chamisa acknowledge the deep corruption in both government and MDC-A-run councils and the pernicious effect such graft has on the country.⁶⁰ Any future agreement between them on tackling misgovernance will, however, require a properly resourced Auditor General's Office with an independent staff who can assess the balance sheets and ownership structures of state-owned companies and examine all government and municipal accounts and state monetary operations. The ZACC, which has already shown an appetite for going after top ZANU-PF officials for corruption, should be given exclusive agency in all national corruption cases as well as more resources and independence so that it can resist any political interference, including pressure to target civil society activists and journalists exposing corruption.

To create the conditions for a dialogue that could lead to these agreements, however, South Africa will have to press Harare to begin rolling back its repression of the

⁵⁸ See also "South Africa signals hardening of 'quiet diplomacy' with Zimbabwe", *Financial Times*, 23 September 2020. Disaffected ZANU-PF elements who had fled Zimbabwe following the coup have lobbied the ANC to shift its position. Although their lobbying was hardly decisive in Pretoria's calculus, it is likely to have contributed to Harare's anger at ANC attempts to start dialogue with other opposition blocs in Zimbabwe, notably MDC-A. Crisis Group interview, ANC policy adviser, 22 October 2020.

⁵⁹ Lindiwe Zulu, the chair of the ANC's international relations subcommittee, said the meeting with ZANU-PF involved frank and difficult discussions, adding that action was required to avert further deterioration. "Lindiwe Zulu and Tendai Biti on the ANC and Zimbabwe", Brenthurst Foundation Webinar, 21 August 2020. It seems the ANC delegation did not meet with opposition and civil society because it ran out of time, rather than because the government forbade it from doing so, as was the case with Ramaphosa's emissaries.

⁶⁰ "Chamisa probes corrupt MDC councils", *New Zimbabwe*, 17 October 2019.

government's opponents, including by taking some visible confidence building steps such as liberating political prisoners. Pretoria should also request that its envoys have the freedom to operate and meet who they need to in Zimbabwe so that it can start building bridges between rival parties.

To ensure that it is not a lonely voice, South Africa should actively lobby other neighbours to join it by appealing to their mutual interest in regional stability. Notably, it should approach Namibia and Angola, two countries with strong diplomatic ties with Zimbabwe and whose ruling parties also belong to the liberation movements' bloc, in order to persuade them to apply their own pressure on Harare. The ANC should play a part in this initiative. South Africa should also look to the African Union (AU) for assistance, if possible before Ramaphosa steps down as chair at the end of 2020. It should request that the AU appoint a high-level mission composed of former heads of state who would travel to Zimbabwe to encourage the government to make progress on political dialogue, governance, human rights and economic recovery plans.

Leaving aside such pressure tactics, South Africa should offer carrots in return for ZANU-PF's cooperation. Pretoria should offer itself to Harare as an interlocutor in getting Western sanctions lifted and lobbying for international debt relief or access to more lending. South Africa has long maintained that sanctions against Zimbabwe are unjust, and it continues to do so even if it has increasingly expressed misgivings about Zimbabwe's economic performance.⁶¹ In order to play the go-between, it will first need to work with Western governments to develop a set of benchmarks that, once achieved, would set the stage for rolling back sanctions as well as supporting international financial institutions in considering rescheduling the \$1.8 billion of debt arrears owed to them and extending concessionary loans to reboot Zimbabwe's economy.⁶² Working through a South African government that can mobilise regional pressure on Harare may be a more effective way for Western governments estranged from ZANU-PF to achieve their aims for better governance in Zimbabwe.

V. Conclusion

South Africa should have every incentive to help its neighbour Zimbabwe avoid tipping into collapse. Having favoured quiet diplomacy for decades, Pretoria has now adopted a much more critical stance toward Zimbabwe's failures of governance. It has also taken the first steps toward coaxing Harare into convening a national dialogue, ending political repression and embarking on meaningful economic reforms. These steps have had limited effect, however, as Harare continues to block South African efforts to engage with Zimbabwe's opposition figures and bring them into the same room with their ZANU-PF counterparts for meaningful dialogue. Pretoria should not give up. It should work with Western donors on a roadmap for reforms that could lead to

⁶¹ In addition to its own position, South Africa has backed an AU call to end sanctions on Zimbabwe. See "African Union statement in support of end of sanctions against the Republic of Zimbabwe", press release, Bureau of the Chairperson of the AU Moussa Faki Mahamat, 25 October 2020.

⁶² See "Why Zim did not get IMF COVID-19 debt relief", *The Herald*, 15 April 2020. "Debt Relief is crucial for Zim", *The Herald*, 17 January 2020; "Heavily Indebted Poor Countries and Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative – Statistical Update", International Monetary Fund, August 2019.

sanctions and debt relief. It should also help Harare see the importance of finally embarking on this long overdue journey. The alternative to reform is likely to be more instability in Zimbabwe and quite possibly in the region.

Johannesburg/Nairobi/Brussels, 17 December 2020

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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