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## **Zimbabwe Now: The Political Economy of Crisis and Coercion**

### **Introduction**

The period in Zimbabwean history beginning in 1996 and culminating in the current conjuncture will loom large as a decisive phase in Zimbabwe's political economy. During these years, the political and economic terrain was substantively restructured, setting out the contours of the current crisis in Zimbabwe. This is not to argue that the problems in Zimbabwe can be understood only by reference to these years, for such an analysis clearly requires a longer historical understanding.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, however, the compressed period between 1996 and mid-2004 can be taken as representing an important distillation of a series of problems that have come to be referred to as the 'Zimbabwean crisis'.

Broadly speaking, the crisis has three overlapping dimensions: that of pan-African and Third-World solidarity in the face of renewed imperialist aggression; the breakdown of the liberation struggle

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<sup>1</sup> Raftopoulos 2003.

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consensus; and the limitations of postcolonial development in the context of globalisation. The first of these questions has recently been examined elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> and the details are not repeated here beyond noting both their international significance and the marked success enjoyed by Mugabe in presenting the Zimbabwe crisis as externally generated and driven. Instead, this paper will focus on what might be termed the complementary dynamics of domestic tyranny and developmental collapse.

There can be little doubt that this period has seen the complete breakdown of the liberation consensus. Of course, this consensus was never unproblematic and was frequently contested, but the nationalism of the 1950s, and, in particular, during the years of the liberation struggle, was nonetheless represented as providing a unifying ideological vision that promised a broad vision of liberation and development. Whenever internal cleavages and fissures threatened to appear, dissident groupings and individuals were ruthlessly marginalised, ideologically policed and programmatically deferred. Moreover, such differences were repeatedly 'placed' within a certain normative rendering of the dominant nationalist view of history and liberation.<sup>3</sup> Nor was this nationalist consensus immediately disturbed by the post-independence slaughter, which occurred in Matabeleland between 1982 and 1987. Indeed, the fact that the full extent of the catastrophe visited by Mugabe on the region's Ndebele inhabitants has only emerged in recent years is itself an important indication of the collapse of nationalist hegemony.<sup>4</sup> The ideological significance, then, of the period under discussion has been the implosion of the assumed unifying vision of the pre- and post-1980 period. In this respect, as in others, Zimbabwe was no different from other postcolonial societies. As trade unionists, public-sector workers and a broad range of civic actors all demanded economic and political changes of one kind or another, the corset of national unity as defined by the ruling party, proved unable to contain the expanding pressures. Moreover, within the ruling party itself, a decisive critique emerged from an important section of Zanu PF structures, namely the war veterans and, in a broader sense, the indigenisation movement. The ways in which the ruling party has sought both to reconfigure consensus while eliminating dissent, provide the key to understanding the increasingly authoritarian politics of the past six years or so.

<sup>2</sup> Phimister and Raftopoulos forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> Raftopoulos 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe/Legal Resources Foundation 1997, Alexander, McGregor and Ranger 2000.