

Zimbabwe

Principal protagonists



Government of Zimbabwe; ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF); rural Mashona support base.

Opposition groups; urban/Matabele support base; White farming minority.

Nature of conflict

Manipulation of ethnic division by government for political ends.

- 👤 Widespread human rights abuses reported.
- 💀 20,000 mostly Matabele in 1983-4; 5,000 since 2000.
- 👤 Up to 4 million, mostly to South Africa.
- 🏡 Valuable commercial farming land.

Population/ethnic composition

12.2m. Shona 67.1%, Matabele 13%, Chewa 4.9%, White 3.5%.

Territorial extent

Zimbabwe: 390,757 km².

Timeline

- 11 Feb 1888: British South Africa Company annexes Matabeleland.
- 29 Oct 1889: British South Africa Company annexes Mashonaland.
- 24 Jan 1901: Matabeleland and Mashonaland united as Southern Rhodesia.
- 1 Oct 1923: Southern Rhodesia becomes a British Crown Colony, with internal self-government.
- 1 Aug 1953-31 Dec 1963: Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.
- 11 Nov 1965: Rhodesia unilaterally declares independence.
- 17 Apr 1980: Internationally recognized independence as Zimbabwe.
- 1984-87: *Gukurahundi* campaign against Matabele.
- Feb 2000: Farm occupations begin.
- 25 May 2006: 'Operation *Murambatsvina*' begins.
- 29 Jun 2008: Robert Mugabe re-elected President, in flawed election.

Current status

Uncertain. Probability of further political repression and violence.



In pre-colonial times the region now known as Zimbabwe was dominated by a cattle-owning elite, the Matabele (an offshoot of the Zulu nation) who claimed ascendancy over their Mashona neighbours. In the 1890s, the region came under the control of Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company. Formal British colonial rule was established in 1923, at which time, uniquely in a British colony, Southern Rhodesia was granted wide internal self-government, albeit on a largely White franchise. White rule continued uncontroversially until the early 1950s, when a constitutional and economic experiment, the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, sought to unite modern-day Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi. After the failure of the federation, Britain speedily advanced Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland to independence (as Zambia and Malawi respectively) under Black majority governments. The Southern Rhodesian government resisted these changes, however, and on 11 November 1965, under the leadership of Ian Smith, Rhodesia unilaterally declared itself independent.

Rhodesia failed to gain official international recognition and came under increasing pressure from Black nationalist groups, who waged a bush war aimed both at Black civilians (who constituted the majority of casualties) and White Rhodesians. Two factions, the largely Mashona Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU, later ZANU-Patriotic Front) and the largely Matabele Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) came to dominate the militant struggle. Both operated their own guerrilla forces; ZANU the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and ZAPU the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA). Tensions, although publicly suppressed

during the bush war, existed between these two forces throughout the conflict.

Following the failure of an internal solution in 1979, which created a Black government for the new state of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia under the leadership of the moderate Bishop Abel Muzorewa, talks under British auspices resulted in a peace settlement, the Lancaster House Agreement, and the holding of a general election in 1980. Claims of voter intimidation by ZANU were widespread, and equally widely suppressed, and ZANU's leader, Robert Mugabe, emerged as the leader of an independent Zimbabwe in February 1980.

An immediate post-independence priority for the incoming regime was the elimination of the potential Matabele political power base, the only force realistically capable of opposing the new government. As early as October 1980, Mugabe held talks with the North Korean government that resulted in an agreement that North Korea would train troops to 'combat malcontents' – an illusory threat at the time. The resulting force, Fifth Brigade, was effectively Mugabe's private army, reporting directly to him and bypassing the conventional military chain of command.

Throughout the first eighteen months of Zimbabwean independence, relations gradually soured between ZIPRA and ZANLA. Both forces, together with the Rhodesian Army, were to be incorporated into the new Zimbabwe Defence Force. However, Matabele recruits complained of lack of preferment for promotion and general ill-treatment at the hands of ZANLA cadres. Pitched battles took place between ZIPRA and ZANLA troops in November 1980 and again in February 1981, which were only quelled by the intervention of former Rhodesian forces. The violence provided the government with the pretext for a major security clampdown, particularly after the discovery of alleged ZIPRA arms caches in early 1982. From March 1983, the 3,500 ex-ZANLA troops now comprising Fifth Brigade were unleashed in Matabeleland, where they engaged in a general campaign of terrorism against the civilian population under the code-name Operation *Gukurahundi* – a Shona term which has the rough English connotation of 'sorting the wheat from the chaff.' Violence continued until 1987 when a thoroughly cowed and frightened Matabele leadership sued for peace. Under the terms of a 'Unity Accord', ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo agreed to 'merge' ZAPU into ZANU-PF in December 1987, whereafter ZAPU disappeared as an independent political force. A general ordinance was signed granting 'pardon' to 'dissidents' who laid down their arms – but which also provided amnesty for ZANU-PF members guilty of the violence.

The elimination of ZAPU, and the 1987 constitutional amendments abolishing the 20 parliamentary seats reserved for Whites under the independence settlement, effectively rendered Zimbabwe a one party state. This situation continued until, in February 2000, Mugabe unexpectedly lost a referendum which would have further amended the constitution and that also provided for the confiscation of farming land without compensation. Land alienation had been a key issue both before and after independence. At independence, the agreed policy of 'willing seller, willing buyer' allowed the mainly White land-owning class to stall on land reform. Successful whittling down of the rights of landowners progressively enabled the government to compulsorily purchase land at the market value and, later, without effective compensation or legal recourse. The actual policy of land redistribution was mired in corruption, however, with farms being transferred to the ownership of ZANU-PF party members lacking the skills to develop their new properties. Many

Zimbabweans felt frustrated at the slow pace of reform, but equally many deplored the cronyism with which land distribution was conducted. Despite widespread voter intimidation, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) did well in the general election of June 2000, winning nearly half the contested seats, including virtually all those in Matabele-dominated areas.

Stung by his defeat in the 2000 referendum, Mugabe launched an openly racist campaign against White 'settlers' – many of whom had in fact come to Zimbabwe since independence – British 'colonialists', and their 'stooges' in the MDC. Within days of the poll defeat, 'War Veterans' (many patently too young to have seen active service) began occupying White farms in moves that the police and the courts did little to prevent. In 2005 all land was nationalized, and former owners denied legal recourse. In 2006 legislation was passed forcing banks to finance Black peasants now occupying formerly White-held farms. The inevitable result was a wholesale collapse in the farming industry, an exodus of the White farmers and other experienced entrepreneurs, and a fatal loss of confidence in the financial sector. The 2002 general election, which Mugabe won, was conducted in an atmosphere of open violence and repression.

Undeterred by international criticism, which was in any case lukewarm, Mugabe then embarked on a campaign called 'Operation *Murambatsvina*', which has been generally translated as 'taking out the trash.' This was supposedly aimed at informal traders and settlements in the towns and cities. Although not overtly ethnic in its targeting, the fact that the political opposition largely draws its support from urban areas, while Mugabe's rural Mashona power base was largely unaffected, means that the campaign had a disproportionate impact amongst urban Matabele. The campaign left whole districts in ruins, and was christened "Zimbabwe's *tsunami*". Over four million Zimbabweans have fled abroad, triggering violent rioting in South Africa. (See 2.55).

With Zimbabwe, once the regional breadbasket, barely able to feed itself, and hyper-inflation of over 100,000%, Zimbabweans voted in Presidential and Parliamentary elections at the end of March 2008. Despite widespread voter intimidation by ZANU-PF, the opposition MDC emerged as the largest parliamentary party, and also claimed victory in the Presidential poll. Against a background of overt violence, however, the MDC Presidential candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai, was forced to withdraw from the Presidential run-off, allowing Mugabe to claim victory.