



The “Toad” and the “Puppet”: The Makoni Moment and Opposition Politics in Zimbabwe.

Introduction.

It is a symptom of the diminished expectations and shrinking horizons in Zimbabwean politics that Simba Makoni's¹ entry into the 2008 presidential race has created such a stir in the country's body politic. With the country sinking further into the mire of an extended political and economic debacle, the prospect of yet another disastrous Mugabe electoral 'victory' appeared a desultory inevitability. Bolstered by the coercive network of party and state control over the country's politics, and supported by the continued disunity of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Mugabe's over-extended stay in power appeared set to continue the ruling party's disastrous haste to “rush the country to the grave” to paraphrase the words of the great radical historian Isaac Deutscher.

Yet, as is often the case with such seemingly overwhelmingly authoritarian regimes, their legitimacy becomes shaky as the narrowness of their political project undermines its nationalist assertions. The cracks in ZANU-PF² have been growing for several years and the voices of

¹ Simba Makoni was Zimbabwe's Minister of Finance and Economic Development from 2000 to 2002. His policies as finance minister, however, were not always in line with those of the ruling party ZANU-PF and with the views of President Mugabe (Makoni favoured, for example, the devaluation of the Zimbabwe Dollar, which Mugabe opposed). He was finally replaced in August 2002 after a relatively short period in office. On 5 February 2008, Makoni announced at a press conference in the Zimbabwean capital Harare that he was planning to run for president.

² The Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) was formed as a Nationalist party in 1961 with Joshua Nkomo as President. At the time, Robert Mugabe became ZAPU's information and publicity secretary. The Rhodesian government banned ZAPU in 1962, which ultimately contributed to a guerilla war against the government. The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) was founded in 1963 by Ndabaningi Sithole, Herbert Chitepo, Edgar Tekere, Leopold Takawira – and Robert Mugabe. From the beginning it had a more militant agenda. During the course of the liberation struggle ZAPU was backed by the former Soviet Union and ZANU by the Chinese. Both parties formed, however, the Patriotic Front (PF) in 1976 to overthrow the minority regime in Rhodesia. After independence in 1980 the alliance split again and Mugabe's ZANU defeated ZAPU in the general elections, with the latter retaining a stronghold in the two Matabeleland provinces. After several years of violent turbulence in the 1980s both parties merged into ZANU-PF in 1987 – which was de facto the decisive step towards a one-party state under Robert Mugabe. ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo became one of Zimbabwe's two Vice-Presidents in 1987.

dissent, at first muted and barely audible, have become more voluble with the deepening crisis in the country. The party that for so long blamed external forces for the Zimbabwean malaise has had to contend with a growing internal critique of the leadership and policies of ZANU-PF itself. Mugabe's total displacement of the crisis onto the forces of imperialism has been confronted with the culpability of his own leadership in the country's downward spiral. The criticism voiced by the opposition and civic for nearly a decade about the assault of ZANU-PF on the liberties of Zimbabweans has finally found a voice from within the ruling party. Though it remains unclear how much resonance such criticism has within ZANU-PF, the assertion that it exists at all signals an important change in the dynamics of this party.

Makoni's Presidential Bid: Political Background

The central fact to keep in mind about Simba Makoni's entry into the 2008 presidential race is that he is pursuing a "reform ZANU-PF" agenda. In his speech announcing his intention to challenge Mugabe, he affirmed his commitment to ZANU-PF:

"Let me affirm here, my faith in, and loyalty to the Party. I would very much have wished to stand as its official candidate. Unfortunately, as we all know, that opportunity was denied to any other cadre who would have offered themselves to serve the Party and country."³

Thus from the onset of his campaign he has presented himself as a voice from within ZANU-PF seeking to return to what he claims are the true vision and values of the ruling party. Makoni draws on the political culture of ZANU-PF, yet wrapped in his affirmation of a "deeper faith in, and higher loyalty to the whole nation of Zimbabwe." This in itself is a step forward, as it brings out into the open a struggle within the ruling party over the future of ZANU-PF after Mugabe.

That Makoni has chosen 2008 to challenge Mugabe is the result of several factors. Firstly the continuing decline of the Zimbabwean economy⁴ poses a threat not only to the majority of Zimbabweans, but also to those who have benefited from the patronage of the ruling party and want to make sure that their perquisites are not being wiped out by Zimbabwe's hyper-inflation. The present crisis came about through the nationalisation of economic assets organised by an incompetent leadership and in the context of isolation from western financiers and donors. In Makoni's words:

"President Mugabe has shown a great deal of resilience over the years, but the truth is that we know enough of his weaknesses and we have come to one simple conclusion; that he and

³ Statement by Simba Makoni: Zimbabwe - Parliamentary and Presidential Elections. 5th February 2007.

⁴ Inflation rates have surpassed 150,000%, which is unprecedented in recent history. The value of the Zimbabwean Dollar decreases by the day. In February 2008 within three days the unofficial exchange rate jumped from 5 million Zim-Dollars for 1 US\$ to 15 million Zim-Dollars for 1 US \$. Estimates usually put unemployment and poverty levels at over 80%. Life expectancy is one of the lowest in the world at 36 (men) / 34 (women).

those around him are incapable of mounting a credible strategy for a sustained recovery of this country.”⁵

Secondly Makoni’s challenge has emerged in a party whose history, since the ascendancy of Mugabe to the leadership, has been marked by a series of violent struggles. From the mid 1970s when Mugabe rose to power by marginalising the young, radical ZIPA⁶ grouping, to the demolition of the rival liberation movement ZAPU during the Gukurahundi atrocities of the 1980s, Mugabe has marshalled the support of the military to consolidate his power. When, as in 2004, various factions within the ruling party tried to legally oppose Mugabe at ZANU-PF’s December conference, Mugabe effectively deployed the party machinery against the “Tsholotsho”⁷ group, including the then influential Minister of Information, Jonathan Moyo⁸. Once again at the end of 2007 Mugabe manipulated the annual party conference, with the support of a section of the war veterans, in order to clinch his nomination for the 2008 Presidential Election. At various stages Mugabe has thus thwarted all attempts to challenge his presidency from within ZANU-PF, and since 1980 has he actively encouraged the ‘provincialisation’ of the party leadership to ensure that no other leader may emerge as a national candidate.

Simba Makoni appears to have strong support from key leaders within the ruling party. A statement by one of Makoni’s backers, the former senior army officer Kudzai Mbudzi, indicates that there may also be significant support for Makoni within the military and intelligence sectors. In a warning to those in ZANU-PF who may want to intimidate Makoni, Mbudzi cautioned:

“We expect overzealous reaction from the intelligence. They must be warned that we are also part of the intelligence and we won’t tolerate that. We warn them that they would be dealt with accordingly in their individual capacity.”⁹

Thus for the first time since taking power, Mugabe is facing a challenge from a candidate who may also have strong support in this key sector.

⁵ Message to all Zimbabweans in South Africa from Simba Makoni President 2008.

⁶ ZANU’s military wing, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), the rival ZAPU’s armed wing Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) had united in 1976 and formed the (albeit short-lived) Zimbabwe People’s Army (ZIPA).

⁷ Tsholotsho District is a business centre in the province Matabeleland-North, some 120km north-west of Bulawayo. Tsholotsho has seen mass-killings during “Gukurahundi” in the first half of the 1980s and is still a highly contested area in Zimbabwe politics. In the run-up to the 2004 December conference, several ZANU-PF heavyweights attended an unofficial meeting in Tsholotsho where they discussed how to get one of the positions as vice-president in order to be in a good position to take over after Mugabe.

⁸ After the December 2004 incidents, ZANU-PF took the decision to reserve the Tsholotsho MP seat for a female candidate in a move that was regarded as a punishment for Jonathan Moyo. Moyo announced that he would campaign as an independent and was subsequently expelled from the cabinet and ZANU-PF. He won the Tsholotsho District MP seat in March 2005 and is currently an independent MP.

⁹ Toby Chimhashu, ‘Mbudzi warns CIO against making Makoni target.’ Newzimbabwe.com 07/02/08.

Makoni has benefited from the split that took place in the MDC in 2005,¹⁰ and the failed bid to re-unite the two formations in 2007. In the absence of a united MDC, Makoni saw the opportunity to profit from disaffection with the ruling party, as well as despair over a divided opposition. It was significant that Makoni announced his candidacy a few days after news of the failed attempt to re-unite the MDC. The failure of the MDC to unite what was perceived as its Shona and Ndebele¹¹ sections, threw the smaller Matabeleland-based Mutambara faction into the arms of Makoni. The MDC-Mutambara announced its support for Makoni while continuing to field its own parliamentary candidates. In 2007 Mutambara had sent out the following challenge to disaffected members of ZANU-PF:

"If you cannot stand up for your beliefs or...do not want to sacrifice your position at the feeding trough or because it will endanger your political ambitions, then you are nothing but a coward. The integrity and true character of a person is judged by where they stand during invidious moments of crisis."¹²

With Makoni's 'coming out' and the rejection by the Tsvangirai MDC of a coalition with his former comrades, Mutambara sought an arrangement to utilise his regional support in Matabeleland in a way that would give him political relevance at national level.

While there is a tentative arrangement with one faction of the MDC, the larger Tsvangirai faction has thus far any working arrangement with Makoni. Morgan Tsvangirai has stated:

"Dr. Makoni has been part of the establishment in ZANU-PF. So he is equally accountable. I believe that what Dr. Makoni is trying is to reform an institutionalised dictatorship. That is not our agenda. This party [the MDC] seeks to transform the political culture of this country, so there is a serious difference between reforming dictatorship and actually transforming it."¹³

¹⁰ The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was formed in 1999 as an opposition party under the leadership of popular trade unionist Morgan Tsvangirai. In the 2000 parliamentary elections, the MDC won 57 of the 120 seats that were contested and for the first time since 1980 constituted a relevant political opposition to ZANU-PF. The party split, however, after the Zimbabwe Senate elections in 2005. For a discussion of the reasons for the split see Brian Raftopoulos, "Reflections on the Opposition in Zimbabwe: The Politics of the Movement for Democratic Change" in Ranka Primorac and Stephen Chan (Eds), **Zimbabwe in Crisis: The International Response and the Space of Silence**. Routledge, London, and New York, 2007.

¹¹ The overwhelming majority of Zimbabweans define themselves as Shona or Ndebele (also known as Matabele, a name originally given to them by the British colonialists). More than two thirds of Zimbabweans speak Shona as their first language, compared to 12-14% Ndebele (mostly concentrated in Matabeleland). Some analysts have argued that the split in the MDC has – among other reasons – an ethnic dimension with the Mutambara faction being predominantly Ndebele-oriented and the Tsvangirai faction Shona-oriented.

¹² Arthur Mutambara, "Why a Reformed ZANU-PF is not the answer to the Zimbabwean Crisis." Speech in Harare, 2007.

¹³ Raymond Mataingire, "Tsvangirai scoffs at Makoni alliance." www.thezimbabwetimes.com 11/02/08.

The Makoni campaign has put little effort into cultivating any linkages with civil society organisations, appearing to regard the latter as a support base for Tsvangirai and therefore a 'lost cause.'

The failure of the South African-led SADC¹⁴ mediation may have triggered further discontent in ZANU-PF and spurred Makoni and his supporters into action. At its inception the objectives of the mediation were that ZANU-PF and the MDC should:

1. Endorse the decision to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in 2008.
2. Agree on steps to be taken to ensure that everybody concerned accepts the results of the elections as being truly representative of the will of the people.
3. Agree on the measures that all political parties and other social forces should implement and respect in order to create the necessary climate to facilitate such acceptance.

After several months of negotiations between ZANU-PF and the MDC the mediation fell apart in February 2008 on three issues: the date of the election; the timeframe for the implementation of the agreed reforms; and the process and manner of the making of a new constitution. While President Mbeki and the SADC claimed that ZANU-PF and the MDC had reached agreement on all substantive matters, and that what remained was to "conclude the outstanding 'procedural' matter of the enactment of the agreed Draft Constitution,"¹⁵ the MDC denounced this position. In a statement issued on 21st February 2008 the MDC noted that the issues that had derailed the mediation "were not matters of procedure but of substance and went to the heart of the matter." Moreover the MDC stated that Mugabe's unilateral proclamation of the date of the election on 25th January 2008, when this matter was still under discussion, "amounted to a repudiation of the SADC dialogue by ZANU-PF."¹⁶

For the MDC it was important to go through the SADC process to show its commitment to African mediation attempts, to once again demonstrate the SADC's limitation with regard to the Zimbabwe crisis, and to expose the continuing intransigence of Robert Mugabe. If the MDC had withdrawn too early it would very easily have been accused of not taking 'African solutions to African problems' seriously. For Makoni, who probably understood the dynamics of the SADC process better than the MDC, given his tenure as executive secretary of the SADC from 1984-1997, awaiting the outcome of the mediation was also important. He too had to be seen to give the SADC process a chance. In the near future it may appear that the failed SADC mediation

¹⁴ Southern African Development Community. The 15 member states are Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa, Mauritius, DR Congo, Madagascar, and the Seychelles. In March 2007, after a violent crackdown on opposition leaders, SADC leaders mandated South African President Thabo Mbeki to lead mediation process between ZANU-PF and the MDC to resolve Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis.

¹⁵ Media Statement on the Extraordinary Meeting of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defense and Security, (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 31st January, 1st February 2008.)

¹⁶ MDC Press Statement on the Failed SADC Dialogue on the Crisis in Zimbabwe, 21st February 2008.

resembled the Détente period in Southern Africa in the 1970s, in which South Africa, Zambia, the liberation movements, and the Smith¹⁷ regime, with pressure from the governments of the UK and the US, entered into discussions to try to deal with the Rhodesian problem. While the Détente exercise failed to end the Rhodesian crisis, it triggered power struggles within the liberation movement and became a prelude for the Lancaster House discussions at the end of the 1970s.

Makoni's candidacy, it can be argued, is the result of the confluence of several factors: The continuing struggles within ZANU-PF; the decline of the economy; the divisions in the opposition; and the failure of the SADC mediation. Moreover it is clear that Makoni has also benefited from nearly a decade of opposition and civic mobilisation against Mugabe's authoritarian regime by drawing on both hope and fatigue to propel his own presidential ambitions.

The 2008 Election and its Possible Aftermath

Under the current conditions there is little chance that the 2008 elections will be free and fair. All the areas in the SADC mediation which dealt with the political conditions required to deliver a generally acceptable election were to a large extent repudiated by the Mugabe regime, and the result is likely to be yet another broadly contested result. The Mugabe media campaign has already rolled into operation and predictably both Makoni and Tsvangirai have been demonised. While the well-known label of "puppet" has been attached to Tsvangirai, Makoni has achieved a more amphibian distinction. Mugabe has likened him to a "frog trying to inflate itself up to the size of an ox. It will burst."¹⁸ Moreover the state controlled newspaper "The Herald" called Makoni's intervention "an alien construct which is worse than all the MDC's put together [...] This whore political formation is intended to oust this one man for the edification of the bitter British."¹⁹

Under the present conditions it is still unclear how Simba Makoni intends to lead his campaign – given that he is an independent without formal party structures to back him up. Makoni's message on this issue is that he has strong support at all levels within ZANU-PF and that this will become apparent in the elections. Thus far, apart from the support of Dumiso Dabengwa and Edgar Tekere, both veterans of the liberation struggles but with little current electoral support in their respective home areas of Matabeleland and Manicaland, Makoni is yet to

¹⁷ Ian Douglas Smith (1919-2007), became Prime Minister of the British Colony Southern Rhodesia in 1964 and unilaterally declared independence in 1965. He was subsequently Prime Minister of Rhodesia from 1965 and maintained a white minority regime until a negotiated settlement end of the 1970s. This settlement was signed on 21 December 1979 and became known as the 'Lancaster House Agreement'. After ZANU-PF had won the 1980 general election, Smith became the official leader of the opposition (as the head of the whites-only 'Republican Front'). He finally retired from politics after the 1985 general elections and lived in Harare until shortly before his death in 2007.

¹⁸ Chris Chinaka "Mugabe belittles opponents as frog and puppet." Newzimbabwe.com 25/02/08.

¹⁹ Nathaniel Manheru, Herald 12th January 2008.

receive the open support of any of the ruling party heavyweights. Given Mugabe's ruthlessness in dealing with opposition both inside and outside of his party, it is unlikely that such support will become public prior to the election.

Makoni must therefore steer a difficult course, combining secret mobilisation within ZANU-PF with an open appeal to the people of Zimbabwe. He needs to break Mugabe's hold on the rural vote, make some headway in the urban areas against Tsvangirai's MDC, and hope that Mutambara's MDC can deliver the bulk of the vote in Matabeleland. Thus far Makoni's political platform has been vague, but he has hinted at a move towards what David Moore has called greater "market civilisation".

For both MDC factions the election is likely to have significant implications. It could show which side has the loyalty of voters in Matabeleland, a key bone of contention in the unity discussion between the two. Should the Mutambara formation fail to deliver on this, it will both, cease to be of use to the Makoni campaign, and signal the end of its political life. On the other hand, if it succeeds in Matabeleland and Makoni is able to break Mugabe's rural stronghold in other areas, the MDC Mutambara will have some leverage in a post-election political reconstruction.

Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC must also maintain its foothold in the urban areas, as well as win a substantial number of seats in Matabeleland in order to remain in serious contention if none of the three presidential candidates gets 51% of the vote. Under these circumstances, should Tsvangirai come in third, the support of his party in a second round of elections would be vital to a Makoni victory, thus putting Tsvangirai in a more favourable position in the event of the formation of a government of national unity. It is highly unlikely that Tsvangirai can win outright given the existing electoral conditions. In the face of another election loss, Tsvangirai also faces the prospect of a leadership challenge from within his party. Thus this election could draw a line under the political career of Morgan Tsvangirai and signal the beginning of a recasting of the opposition as a whole, with the question of MDC unity returning to the agenda, as a key element in the campaign for MDC leadership.

Mugabe's campaign is likely to be as controversial as ever, with the prospect of violence increasing if Mugabe feels he is losing his grip on the rural vote. It is highly improbable that Mugabe will allow any other candidate to win this election, notwithstanding Makoni's threat to split ZANU-PF. However, even if Mugabe wins, ZANU-PF will have been drastically changed and deeply split by the succession battle. Moreover, a Mugabe victory will only produce another contested election in the country, deepen the political and economic crisis, and intensify Western sanctions against the Mugabe regime. This could exacerbate the factional struggles within ZANU-PF and, most dangerous of all, may tempt sections of the military to intervene more directly. The commander of Zimbabwe's Defence Forces, Constantine Chiwenga, has already hinted at such a move. On March 9th, 2008 Chiwenga declared:

“Elections are coming and the army will not support or salute sell-outs and agents of the West before, during, and after the presidential election. We will not support anyone other than President Mugabe who has sacrificed a lot for the country.”²⁰

This position was reiterated by the head of the prison service, Paradzai Zimondi, who threatened to “go back to defend my land” if Mugabe loses.²¹ These threats are a repetition of those made by General Vitalis Zvinavashe, head of the army in 2002, ahead of that year’s presidential election. These are ominous signs and such a military intervention would be the beginning of an even darker period in Zimbabwe’s history, one that we should all hope can be avoided.

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²⁰ Fikile Mapata, “Army threatens coup if Mugabe loses.” Newzimbabwe.com 11/03/08.

²¹ Ibid.