



ZIMBABWE: The more things change, the more they stay the same?

By Zukiswa Wanner



On the morning of Sunday the 26th of August as I walk along Addis Ababa Rd in the Lusaka suburb of Rhodespark, I hear sirens and see about eight motorcycles and the blue lights that shout *Political Leadership Traveling*. There are police all along the street. I greet one and she replies in a friendly voice. 'So, is there a state guest this early in the morning or is the President going to church?' I ask the last bit cheekily. She smiles. 'No. The President is going to Zimbabwe for the inauguration.' I, a Zambian-born to a Zimbabwean mother and a South African father, have found myself following these particular Zimbabwean elections on the ground in the two countries. My fellow travelers and I leave Zambia for Zimbabwe on the 27th of July. We want to be on time for the final pre-election rallies in Zimbabwe.

Like the Kenyan elections in 2017, there are more than 20 candidates running in the Zimbabwean elections. Only two candidates seem to matter though according to most voters I talk to. Seventy five year old Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, the incumbent, for ZANU (PF) and 40 year old Nelson Chamisa of the MDC Alliance. ZANU supporters popularly chant, tweet or finish their facebook or Whatsapp posts with #EDPfee, meaning ED is in. Chamisa supporters, more vitriolic on social media push the Chamisa Chete Chete narrative (#CCC) which translates to Chamisa Only. The incumbent shows financial muscle with ZANU branded four wheel drives all over the place, ZANU branded clothes for free give away and billboards all over the city stating what he promises to bring with his

'new' government. Chamisa supporters have to purchase caps, t-shirts and hoodies to fundraise for their candidate and on the evening before the final rally the candidate himself tweets asking for \$5 donations to pay poll agents on election day.

On the day of the final rally, we kick off our day by attending Zimbabwean writer Panashe Chigumadzi's launch of her book *These Bones Will Rise*. It's a fitting book launch to attend during this time as it traces the history of Zimbabwe from precolonial days with a particular focus on the popular spirit medium, Nehanda Nyakasikana and how she has been co-opted since the colonial era into the narrative of the sole governing party since independence, ZANU (PF). I spot many literary types at this event at Theatre in the Park. Surprisingly full for an event on a Saturday morning.

My cousin B who is a strong supporter of the governing party promises to come and meet up with me to attend the ZANU (PF) rally at the National Sports Stadium. Hours later she has not turned up. I end up attending only the opposition rally at Freedom Square near Harare Sheraton and ironically ZANU (PF) headquarters. We arrive at Freedom Square around 2 in the afternoon. Initially the rally was supposed to be at the National Sports Stadium but somehow they were denied the space and the governing party held their rally there instead. The energy was electric and the field was all red. Images coming from the National Sports Stadium, on the other hand, showed a stadium that was near empty with the gates closed when people tried to depart. A popular tweet going around read *I want a wife who celebrates whenever I come home like Chamisa's supporters*. This was replied by another, doubtless also a Chamisa supporter, *Not one who's like an ED supporter who walks out when I start speaking*. I couldn't help thinking though that perhaps Harare was not the best place for the final opposition rally. The major cities of Zimbabwe are without a doubt, largely opposition strongholds. It may therefore have made more of an impact if the final rally was in Uzumba Maramba Pfungwe (Zimbabwe's electoral equivalent of Tharaka Nithi for unaccounted numbers of ZANU voters in contested elections). On that final rally, Chamisa disturbingly states that he has no issues with Mugabe and will work with his break away party who are now part of his alliance.

The day before election, former President Mugabe calls a media conference where he whines about having been given a pension of \$467 thousand dollars only in a country where people spend hours in queues to access \$30 of their money a day. He famously also complains that the roof at his house needs repairs and the current leadership of ZANU is ignoring him. He, he tells all those who are watching, needs to bring in artisans from China to fix. Because, clearly, there are no people in Zimbabwe who can fix a roof. Finally when asked who he will vote for, he states that he cannot vote for the people who overthrew him. He too joins the Harare urban chant, 'Chamisa chete chete.' That same Sunday ED responds to the press conference via social media telling all and sundry how Chamisa equals Mugabe. Chamisa too calls a press conference and cockily declares that he has already won and any Presidential loss will be yet again rigging by ZANU (PF). Both leading candidates are reported for violating Zimbabwean electoral laws for campaigning after the last date permitted. The Chair of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) Judge Priscilla Chigumba announces to the country that two candidates are being investigated for electoral breaches. Up until today, inauguration day, we never hear what happened to the charges. Certainly no-one got disqualified.

Election Day dawns with much excitement for me. I shadow my cousin, a journalist, through some polling stations in Harare and the surrounds. In most places I visit, the lines for men seem longer than those for women. I am unsure whether the women voted earlier in the morning or whether they have just decided none of the candidates work for them. The 40 year old candidate of 'change' has said some seriously misogynistic statements including 'jokingly' offering his sister to the incumbent should he win the elections. The incumbent, on the other hand, has failed to deliver any of the promises post the coup-that-wasn't such as prosecuting corrupt politicians. Later, I go to a friend's bar with some friends. Election Day for 2018 in Zimbabwe coincides with my birthday. Banter

between the Chamisa and ED supporters is lighthearted with each group believing their candidate will win. The ED supporters generally seem to be more financially well-off than the Chamisa supporters though.

Two days later, I am in Harare CBD buying bus tickets to return to Zambia for a writing workshop. I walk down First Street from Samora Machel Avenue. I look left on Nelson Mandela Avenue and see a sea of red-clad MDC supporters near MDC headquarters now dubbed Morgan Tsvangirayi House. With them, I see a truck with riot police. Both the police and the MDC supporters appear in high spirits but nothing appears untoward. On my return from Road Port from buying ticket, I get into Greenwood Pharmacy on First Street where my great aunt is filling out a prescription. Things soon change. We have to be closed inside the pharmacy. Chamisa supporters are now marching asking for shops to be closed until election results are released. My 70-something old great aunt decides they are not threatening and asks that we be let out of the pharmacy. We walk down with the demonstrators and the march seems good-natured. When someone attempts to take a video, a young man points at her, 'madam, you are not an election observer. This is your country too. Join us.' Everyone laughs. I part with my great aunt when she gets on a kombi to her home. I am going the opposite direction for a kombi to where I am staying. As I cross the road to get to the rank, a man driving warns a policewoman beside me, 'Amai. Go and buy some civilian clothing quickly. These guys will attack you.' An MDC supporter who is part of a group walking in the same direction replies, 'Don't worry amai. Nothing will happen to you. You are a member of the Zimbabwe Republic Police not the ZANU Republic Police.' More good-natured laughter. I get to the rank. The protestors have told the drivers that they can't load. 'We are shutting down the city until they give us the results. The longer they keep them, the greater the chances of rigging.' ZEC has five days to announce the results. But Chamisa's supporters are restless. The kombi drivers leave the rank. I have to walk up to get the kombi elsewhere far away from the protestors.

A WhatsApp text from a Kenyan friend comes in as soon as the kombi starts leaving.

Hello Zooks. Are you guys safe?

Of course I'm safe. Why would you ask that? I reply.

Twitter says there is shooting happening in Harare CBD. He replies.

Rubbish. Some alarmists obviously. I was just there. There are protests but everything I have seen is peaceful.

Ok.

When I get home I put on ENCA to see how the vote-counting is going. It is then I realize my Kenyan friend was right.

ENCA journalist Thulasizwe Simelane is interviewing some injured people. There are claims of three dead. The shooters? The Zimbabwean army.

Later, we will learn that six people died. Among them, a friend's aunt shot in the back while walking to her car after shutting up shop.

Later too, ZANU supporters will talk of how rowdy MDC supporters were. They will talk of how sad it is that there have been loss of lives but Chamisa is responsible for the loss of lives of these people. He shouldn't have told his supporters to protest. I shed a tear for the deceased. Almost a year ago, I heard similar statements in another country. In different guises, ZANU and KANU seem destined to govern forever whatever lives are lost. An old Chimurenga 2 song states *Zimbabwe ndeyeropa*. The

song still rings true in 2018. Blood has been shed. The incumbent who, until he became an electoral candidate, was Commander-in-Chief says he doesn't know who deployed the military. There shall be investigations.

I get on the bus to return to Zambia the next day.

Members of Zimbabwe National Army ask for a ride from the driver. They are let in. Uniformed services generally are permitted free rides on public transport as a rule in Zimbabwe. On the bus, the air is hostile. When they disembark, voices are raised. 'These killers,' someone says. A conversation ensues. There is a ZANU supporter behind me. Voices are raised. How can any reasonable person suffering like everyone support ZANU, someone asks. When the ZANU supporter states that he is from Uzumba, everyone laughs and the tension is reduced.

That night, results are announced.

ED is a winner with over 10 percent more voters for Presidential elections than there were for council and Parliament.

MDC says they were rigged. They are on their way to court. The court accepts the papers.

The inauguration is cancelled.

Reports are that there is a raid at MDC Harare East Parliamentarian Tendai Biti's home. He decides that he is in danger and attempts to escape into Zambia. Zambia deports him. A friend suggests that he is getting payback for his support for Zambian opposition leader Hakainde. No-one knows. What everyone knows though is the tweet that Zimbabwean incumbent tweets. He has given an order for Biti to be released. So the judiciary is captured? Is the question many throw around on social media.

MDC goes to court.

For the first time in Zimbabwean history, it's televised.

I am back in Zimbabwe at the time of the court presentations.

My pro-ZANU lawyer cousin is convinced that MDC's case was weak. They won't win.

My pro-MDC lawyer cousin is convinced the MDC case was strong. The election will be annulled or at the least, there will be a rerun.

I am no lawyer but I am impressed by the ZEC and MDC lawyers.

I have just got into Lusaka, Zambia on Friday afternoon when the court ruling comes in.

MDC's case has been dismissed with costs.

Chamisa dismisses the dismissal.

The inauguration is not delayed.

Today, Sunday morning, Edgar Lungu of Zambia wakes up the residents of Rhodespark in Lusaka with sirens as he makes his way to the inauguration.

No-one has still been held responsible for the death of the six people on August 1. There is no feedback on the investigation on who deployed the soldiers.

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