# 1 Introduction

## *Thinking a New Zimbabwe*

> Elections are evil, they cause deaths, they create joblessness, homelessness, property is destroyed, the civil liberties of people are eroded, the rule of law is suspended. I can't imagine having an election again. It's a dreaded experience.[1]

This comment is a reflection on Zimbabwe's 2008 elections, the most violent and contested in its history. It was made by a man who works with some of the poorest communities in Harare, many of which had borne the brunt of state-led violence, and had suffered great hardship under the economic meltdown that accompanied it. When he made it, in 2011, members of these communities had just about managed to achieve a measure of stability. The idea of more elections, planned for 2013, was unimaginable.

Yet those elections did take place, and they were remarkable, and remarkably different from those in 2008. For one thing, the 2013 elections were not marked by overt violence and disruption; they were reasonably good-tempered and even marked by moments of humour. What's more, although there were accusations of rigging – and evidence to suggest substantial irregularities – they have been broadly accepted internationally as delivering an outcome that reflected the will of the Zimbabwean people. Most remarkable of all, they delivered an overwhelming victory for Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party, and a crushing defeat for Morgan Tsvangirai and the MDC, the man and party that many argue had really won the 2008 elections.

This book explains how this happened. In telling the story of the 2013 elections, we tell the story of how Zimbabwean politics shifted so dramatically in five short years. For many reasons, these are

[1] Civil society activist in an interview in Harare, 30 August 2011 (JG).

important elections to look at, both for what they tell us about the politics of Zimbabwe and for the broader themes that emerge about modern politics in the region. For Tsvangirai and the opposition, 2013 was supposed to be the 'break-through moment', the final push that would see them overturn a tired and discredited ruling party, in power for more than 30 years. For Mugabe, entering his eighth election in his 90th year, the moment represented a last stand, the moment of judgement on a political life. For many in his party, and their colleagues in the security sector, defeat would mean an end to power and possibly the personal security and material wealth it brought. This election was therefore of enormous personal and emotional importance to both party leaders; for the political elites more generally, the material and security stakes were high.

It was politically highly significant too, coming after five years of a power-sharing government, an arrangement patched together by the region's leaders after the violence and rigging of the 2008 poll. The Government of National Unity (GNU) had been an uncomfortable alliance, marking out a period that often felt like a time of waiting – transition, many people called it – for the moment of decision. Which way would the country go – back to the patriotic nationalism of ZANU-PF that had seemed so discredited in 2008, or towards the Western-style social democracy of the MDC?

The election was also a test of the region's ability to manage and sanction an electoral process. This election was more than usually marshalled by the leaders of the southern African countries (SADC),[2] led by South Africa's president Jacob Zuma. They had been instrumental in clearing up the mess created after 2008; they had watched over a constitutional reform process, and they had tried to ensure that the 2013 process would take place in an orderly, fair and democratic fashion. Their ability to do these things was a test of how far they could manage their own problem cases, to turn Zimbabwe into a more

[2] SADC is the Southern African Development Community and comprises Angola, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

peaceful and stable regional actor and to provide ballast for the region's democratic credentials more generally.

Finally, the elections were a moment for the West to re-evaluate its relationship with Zimbabwe. After the bitter rows with Mugabe's government since the 1990s, and the sanctions and pariah status meted out to it as a result, 2013 was potentially the moment of re-engagement, re-investment: the resumption of normal relations. This was something that most Western donors wanted to see; the European Union (EU) demonstrated its eagerness by quietly relaxing sanctions in the run-up to the poll. An MDC government would allow an immediate return of Zimbabwe to international donor favour; any president other than Mugabe would at least open up interesting potential for friendlier relations.

In the end the result was a stunning validation of Mugabe and ZANU-PF, an expression of distaste for compromise government, and a crushing rejection of Tsvangirai's modernisation programme. Mugabe gained enormous political credibility from the result – he was quickly elected president of SADC and then of the African Union (AU), and was able to control a succession battle that emerged in his party two years later. Tsvangirai was flattened by the result, helplessly standing by as his party 'hit the delete button'. It is now difficult to see the revival or emergence of any Zimbabwean opposition in the medium-term.

Internationally, the election provided a solid success for the region and beyond it – delivering a twenty-first century African election that was widely judged to have been reasonably peaceful and credible. And it left Western donors with a conundrum: to accept Mugabe's mandate and re-engage, or not? It is possible to imagine that ZANU-PF's election victory has provided a key moment in the assertion of African control over its own affairs.

## THE THEMES THAT GUIDED THE ELECTIONS

The book deals with several important themes that formed the backdrop to the 2013 elections. Loosely, these can be grouped into conditions, characters and relationships.

The key conditions that shaped the 2013 elections begin with the legacies of colonialism. Despite the fact that Zimbabwe has been independent since 1980, the country's politics continue to be dominated by structures and relationships inherited from the colonial era. The fact that the ruling party and its leaders were forged through a violent anti-colonial war still shapes the rationales of government – its tendencies to fall back on the security apparatus, its hierarchical rigidity, and the continuing importance of the war credentials of its key members (Bratton, 2014). More widely, the ruling party's anti-colonial identity finds resonances among Zimbabweans, particularly in rural areas where the war was most keenly experienced. Mugabe himself is still highly valued as the war leader who led his people to independence. This independence legacy is closely linked to land redistribution, which began in 2000 when groups of war veterans marched onto white farms and evicted their occupants. This was the moment that Mahmood Mamdani (2008) has controversially described as the point of Zimbabwe's 'true independence', as if by expelling the white farmers, the country could return to an authentic, pre-colonial identity.

The anti-colonial rhetoric has been part of Mugabe's repertoire since the late 1990s when he engaged in a standoff with the British government and then parts of the Commonwealth, the EU and other Western donors.[3] As a political tool it bought him domestic and regional support, although many Zimbabweans take it with a large pinch of salt. As one Harare resident put it: 'He doesn't believe that, but they just want to brainwash people, to put something into people's mind so they can remain in power. He's just power-hungry I think. Long back, they used to believe him but not now. He's been promising this and that, but there is nothing.'[4]

[3] Few international relationships have involved name-calling on such a scale as that between Robert Mugabe and Tony Blair's governments. The point at which Mugabe was calling Blair a 'toilet' and likening Britain to a sea monster, while members of Blair's government were calling Mugabe's regime 'uncivilised' and a 'basketcase', what Tendi calls discourses of 'demonisation' (Tendi, 2014), must mark a low point in the history of diplomatic exchange.

[4] Mbare resident, Harare, 2 September 2011 (JG).

However, the message was employed with some success in 2013 in government attacks on 'neo-colonial' sanctions employed by the West. Many Zimbabweans remain ambivalent about this, but it is a live debate, and one that played an important role in 2013.

Alongside this legacy are more recent memories of the economic disaster that reached its peak in 2008 with runaway inflation, financial collapse and severe food shortages. Part of the disaster is put down to unscheduled compensation payments made to war veterans in 1997, and part to the collapse in agricultural exports that followed the land seizures from 2000. Some Zimbabweans blame the World Bank and IMF Economic Structural Adjustment Programme introduced in 1991, some the drought of the same year, while others think it was the president's wife Grace Mugabe who ruined the country with her lavish shopping trips to London – a signifier of the extravagant consumption patterns of the ruling elites in recent years. The government tends to blame Western sanctions. But this mixture of economic mismanagement, sour international relations and bad luck led to what the majority of Zimbabweans describe as a nightmarish time when businesses collapsed, salaries became worthless on the journey from the bank to the shops, or in the time it took to queue to buy food, and people lived on *maputi* (popcorn) and soya beans. These traumatic events left many Zimbabweans feeling profoundly insecure.

The Zimbabwe dollar was abolished shortly after the 2008 elections, and the US dollar and South African rand formally adopted. The economy has stabilised, but memories of the meltdown condition Zimbabweans' fears about their still shaky hold on economic viability. Even in 2011 after the economy had found a precarious stability, people still felt rocked by what they had been through. During conversations carried out in the course of research for this book, people reflected on the social and psychological damage that had been done: 'Everything is just muddled'; 'Everywhere we walk around there are problems everywhere as if this is not the country of

our birth'; 'It's like death everywhere'.[5] Rumours about plans to reintroduce the Zimbabwe dollar, or about the return of Western investment can cause waves of anxiety or excitement.

The year of 2008 also saw the era of Zimbabwe's worst electoral violence, and this is the third background condition that informed attitudes in 2013. Sachikonye (2011) has provided a careful and painful account of Zimbabwe's history of violence, exploring its origins in the liberation war in the 1970s. These were manifest early on through the factional disagreements between ZANU and ZAPU – the two branches of the anti-colonial struggle – and led to a vicious government clampdown on a largely fictional insurgency in the ZAPU stronghold of Matabeleland in the mid-1980s. Operation Gukurahundi, undertaken by the country's feared Fifth Brigade, led to the death or disappearance of 20,000 people and fixed an ethnic animosity that remains potent today. Violence also played a key part in the invasions of white farms in 2000, and in the razing of poor urban areas in Operation Murambatsvina in 2005, seen by many as an attempt by the government to disperse and demoralise opposition support. Violence became part of the electoral contest, helping mould the polarised party politics between the MDC and ZANU-PF from 2000 (LeBas, 2011). Beatings and arrests of opposition politicians and activists became almost normal at this time – many will remember the striking pictures of the MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai emerging from police custody in 2007 to speak to the press, dishevelled and battered, with a bloodied and bruised face. In the elections of 2008, after Tsvangirai won more votes than Mugabe in the president poll, forcing the president into a run-off, the security forces and ZANU-PF militia unleashed a brutal wave of violent retribution against parts of the country that had voted for Tsvangirai, leading to his withdrawal from the contest and leaving the presidency to Mugabe by default. Memories of a period that has traumatised many Zimbabweans remained near the surface in 2013.

[5] Civil society activist, Harare, 30 August 2011; Highfields resident, Harare, 1 September 2011; Chitungwiza resident, 4 September 2011 (JG).

The second theme we explore, and which plays a critical part in understanding the 2013 elections, is that of the characters of the main actors. These range from the government elites through civil society activists down to ordinary voters.

Mugabe himself continued to be a toweringly important figure in Zimbabwe. Not only did he exercise masterly control over his own party, and over political events in the country, he had huge importance in the region (evidenced in his election as president of the SADC in 2014 and of the AU in 2015), and continued to dominate and to a large extent manipulate Western policy towards his country. Mugabe is a controversial character who has often been misunderstood in the West. His brutal political methods and his management over economic chaos are only part of the story: Mugabe inspires respect among many of his own people, as well as throughout Africa for being a highly intelligent and politically brilliant politician who is unusually ready and able to stand up to the West. Zimbabweans can express deep disgust and hatred for him – one women asked us in 2011, 'Can they not do what they did to Saddam Hussein? I would like to see Mugabe hiding in a hole in the ground'.[6] But even his fiercest critics express admiration for him on occasion, as did this man in a discussion just before the 2013 election about Mugabe's possible defeat: 'It will be sad to see him go. That is a great man. He could have been greater than Mandela – if he had known when to leave office.'[7] Mugabe's dominance, despite the fact that he was nearing his 90th birthday, is a key part of the story of the 2013 elections.

The second key political figure was MDC leader and former trade unionist, Morgan Tsvangirai. He has been the most successful opposition leader in Zimbabwe's history, building a viable party within a handful of years, and beating Mugabe in the first round of the presidential election in 2008. He is respected for his personal courage, and his refusal to make the death of his wife in a suspicious

[6] Chitungwiza resident, 4 September 2011 (JG).
[7] Harare resident, 19 July 2013 (JG).

car accident into political capital.[8] But Tsvangirai has personal and political flaws. His party split in 2006 over arguments about his leadership style. And after entering the coalition GNU in 2009, he was often described as indecisive and easily manipulated by Mugabe and his colleagues. Stories about his colourful love life after the death of his wife added to the impression that his mind was not fully on his job as prime minister, and the growing comfort and corruption among his MDC colleagues in government caused anger among his supporters, many of whom felt betrayed by their leaders.

A wider cast of characters also played crucial parts in this story: Solomon and Joice Mujuru, the powerful husband-and-wife team at the heart of ZANU-PF, who came under suspicion for being too reformist; Emerson Mnangagwa, their rival for the succession, and the man many Zimbabweans fear would make an even more brutal president than Mugabe; and Tendai Biti, the technocratic MDC Minister of Finance, who many credit with stabilising the Zimbabwean economy, but who became locked with Tsvangirai in a fierce battle over the direction of the MDC. Others led a range of breakaway opposition forces, such as Welshman Ncube, the leader of the rival MDC faction, and Simba Makoni, one-time ZANU-PF loyalist, who stood as an independent candidate for the presidency in 2013. Finally, in the months leading to the elections, the sudden Facebook appearance of a figure named Baba Jukwa provided a mischievous twist to the elections. His political gossip appeared grounded enough to suggest he was a renegade 'insider' of the highest ZANU-PF circles. On the eve of polling, he advised his followers and Facebook friends to vote MDC. He may well have been the creation of the circle around Vice President Joice Mujuru, setting the stage for an eventual post-election struggle with Emerson Mnangagwa for the succession to Mugabe. Personalities – material and virtual – are the lifeblood of any election.

[8] Many believe the accident was a botched assassination attempt on Tsvangirai himself.

Election analysis often concentrates on political elites, but elections are unusually a time where the opinions and activities of the population come to the fore. So a further crucial 'figure' discussed is that of the Zimbabwean people. A lot of the discussion in this book is based on interviews with grass-roots activists, civil society leaders and ordinary voters. Many have been badly treated by government policy and repression in recent years; many too have benefitted, for example, from land reform which gave small-scale farmers access to livelihoods unknown for generations. Zimbabweans are politically savvy. Some of them are weary of politics and deal with elections by keeping a low profile until it is all blown over. Some engage enthusiastically in the process, seeing opportunities for political expression and material advancement unavailable at other times. Others, despite brutal treatment and bitter experiences of defeat and stolen elections, remain engaged and optimistic about the power of elections to change their lives. We explore what Zimbabweans made of the policies and personalities on offer, and we discuss their analysis of why the election turned out the way it did.

The final theme explored in this book is that of relationships. Here we have a complex web of relationships – within the coalition government itself of course, with the dynamics of power-sharing a new challenge for ZANU-PF, and a particularly difficult one for the inexperienced MDC. The ways in which Mugabe first sidelined, and then tamed Tsvangirai form another important backdrop to 2013.[9] At the same time, the relationships between the parties and their political followers were gradually but radically altered over the years of coalition. ZANU-PF's steady and persistent efforts to reconnect with voters, and to mobilise supporters, reportedly began as early as 2008; the MDC's neglect of its core voters, and its gradual but devastating

[9] There are several good accounts of the transition period in Zimbabwe. For example, see Murithi and Mawadza, 2011; Masunungure and Shumba, 2012; Raftopoulos, 2013; Chan and Primorak, 2013.

dissociation from the concerns of ordinary Zimbabweans, also had dramatic consequences for the outcome in 2013.

Crucial too were relationships within the SADC region. The GNU had been organised and imposed by SADC under the leadership of South Africa's Thabo Mbeki. The region's leaders continued to play a role in shaping the fortunes of the GNU, and were to provide a vital alibi for the elections themselves: the verdicts of SADC and AU observers on the quality of the democratic process were of great importance to Zimbabwe's regional status, which would reflect to the wider world as well as back into the country itself. SADC leaders, and their relationships with Zimbabwe's key political players, were of more than usual importance in 2013.

Other international relationships played a role too. Although they were less powerful in determining domestic relationships, the Western countries' decisions over whether and when to ease sanctions were pored over, used and misused by Zimbabwe's political leaders. Sanctions, although targeted at ZANU-PF figures, were an effective tool in Mugabe's narrative of Western imperialism. They were used to distinguish between ZANU-PF's patriotic nationalism and the MDC's equivocations over land reform and relationships with Western supporters. This message finally began to gain traction, so that although it had once been an asset for the MDC, in 2013 Western support was more of a liability.

The final relationship discussed here is that between state and society. This is about how Zimbabweans feel about themselves, both as subjects of an authoritarian political regime and as masters of their own fate. Here is a story of ambivalence: one of hopefulness and world weariness; fear and loathing, and love and respect; nostalgia and attachment to patriotic history and a desire to move the country on; idealisation of the West and an acknowledgement of fit within the region; respect for or fear of violence and desperation for a more ordered state–society relationship; a need and desire for material wealth along with an idea of a Zimbabwean moral status; the feeling of regional superiority and the fear of becoming the regional joke.