

Zimbabwe Overview

Updated June 2008

- [Environment](#)
- [Peoples](#)
- [History](#)
- [Governance](#)
- [Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples](#)

Environment

Zimbabwe lies in the heart of southern Africa, sharing a long eastern border with Mozambique, southern and western borders with South Africa and Botswana, and a north-western border with Zambia along the Zambezi River. In the north-west it also touches on Namibia's Caprivi Strip. Much of the country consists of high plateau, climbing to mountains in the east. The country is rich in deposits of chromium ore and other minerals.

Peoples

Main languages: Shona, SiNdebele, English

Main religions: syncretic Christianity, Christianity, indigenous beliefs, Islam

Minority groups include Ndebele and Kalanga 2.2 million, (Ethnologue 2001/2000), Tonga 140,000, (Ethnologue 2001) Shangaan (Tsonga), Venda 84,000 (Ethnologue 1989) and whites 47,000 (2002 census).

The Shona-speaking people, who today form about 77 per cent of the population, did not originally see themselves as a 'tribe'. Shona-speakers were spread over great distances and lacked consciousness of a common cultural or political identity. 'Shona-ness' is thus a creation of the past hundred years. Colonial missionaries and administrators set about categorizing Shona into clusters or sub-tribes on the basis of largely spurious inferences. These artificial constructs took on lives of their own, and sub-groupings and hierarchies emerged: Zezeru (central), Karanga (south-central) and Manyika (east) are the three largest blocs.

With about 14 per cent of the population (16 per cent if the affiliated Kalanga are included), Ndebele are Zimbabwe's largest minority and their traditional lands (Matabeleland) are in the south-west of the country, around Bulawayo.

At the political and geographical margins outside the Shona-Ndebele polarity are three peoples together making up about 2 per cent of Zimbabwe's population. Shangaan and Venda people live mainly in the far south of Zimbabwe, and Tonga were forced to abandon their ancestral homes on the shores of the

Zambesi River in the north of the country in 1957–8 after construction of the hydro-electric dam at Kariba.

History

The first Bantu peoples arrived in today's Zimbabwe around 2,000 years ago, displacing the original population of Khoisan hunter-gatherers. About 1,100 years ago, Shona-speaking Bantus began establishment of various states, including that of Great Zimbabwe. In the following centuries Shona kingdoms developed thriving trade with Arab and Swahili merchants at the coast of the Indian Ocean. Portuguese invaders in the 16th century disrupted this trade, but their challenge encouraged the Shona (Mashona) kingdoms to band together into the prosperous Rozvi Empire, which drove away the Portuguese. In 1837, following clashes with the Zulu, Ndebele people invading from South Africa conquered the Shona and established themselves as a ruling class. However, just 40 years later British businessman Cecil Rhodes arrived, seeking access to the area's gold mines for his British South Africa Company. The Ndebele signed a concession agreement with Rhodes in 1888, but the company increased its demands. The Ndebele and the Shona revolted, but were defeated by company militia in the Matabele Wars of 1893-1897.

A new British territory called 'Rhodesia' was established and white immigration increased. In 1911 the territory split into Northern Rhodesia (today's Zambia) and Southern Rhodesia (today's Zimbabwe). Southern Rhodesia became a self-governing British colony in 1922, in which blacks were denied a vote, and blacks were subsequently stripped of access to the best farmland. From 1953 to 1963 Southern Rhodesia was united with Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland (today's Malawi) in the 'Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland'. In 1963, when anti-colonial protests led to the dissolution of the Federation, and with independence for Zambia and Malawi nearing, Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith resisted British pressure for the introduction of majority rule. In the state now renamed simply 'Rhodesia', Smith faced growing resistance movements: the predominantly Ndebele Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), led by Joshua Nkomo, and the Shona splinter group, Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), led by Ndabaningi Sithole and Robert Mugabe.

Smith declared Rhodesian independence from Britain in 1965 and jailed the ZAPU and ZANU leaders from 1964 to 1974. Nkomo and Mugabe then left the country and launched separate armed movements against the Smith regime. Pressure from the rebel movements and UN sanctions eventually forced the Smith regime to relent to majority rule in 1979. In the country's first free elections of March 1980, the Shona-dominated ZANU overwhelmed the largely Ndebele ZAPU, with voting largely following ethnic lines and Robert Mugabe became president of Zimbabwe.

Shortly after his 1980 election, Mugabe summoned nationalism among the Shona people – comprising about 70 per cent of the population – to consolidate his power and sideline his greatest liberation rival, the Ndebele tribesman and ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo. It is estimated that Mugabe's 'Gukurahundi' pogrom in the Ndebele heartlands of Matabeleland and the Midlands from 1983-1987 resulted in 10,000-20,000 killings. In 1985 voting had also largely followed ethnic lines, but at the end of the killing in 1987, ZAPU was absorbed into ZANU, and Zimbabwe became a de facto one-party state under Mugabe's ZANU-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).

President Mugabe made halting attempts to steer the country away from ZANU-PF's embrace of Marxism and towards a market economy. A growing debt burden, the social pinch of structural adjustment policies, and severe drought tipped the country into economic crisis in the early 1990s. Throughout the decade, discontent in Zimbabwe mounted, fuelled by the continued inequity in the distribution of land. Whites, who made up only one per cent of the population after independence in 1980, still owned around 70 per cent of Zimbabwe's arable land.

Frightened by a national strike in 1997 and subsequent demonstrations, Mugabe made the issue of land redistribution his own. But instead of backing land reform, in 2000 he authorized a land grab, accompanied by fiery, anti-white rhetoric. Over the next few years, seized white farms were handed to blacks, and it became apparent that political loyalty to ZANU-PF was the most important determinant of re-distribution, trumping need, skill, or status as a bona fide veteran of the liberation war. The bottom fell out of Zimbabwe's economy as the country followed a trajectory of dictatorship, despair and deepening international isolation.

[^top](#)

Governance

From 1998 to 2002, President Mugabe involved Zimbabwe in the wars of the Democratic Republic of Congo, fighting on the side of the Kinshasa regime and gaining spoils from that country's rich natural resources for ZANU-PF insiders. The unpopular military adventure burdened an already faltering economy, and helped to prompt the formation in 1999 of an opposition group called the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

In 2000, Mugabe attempted to amend the constitution to allow himself two more terms as president, and the power to dissolve parliament, but these moves were rejected in a referendum broadly perceived by Zimbabweans as a vote of no-confidence in his government. Later in 2000, the MDC nearly defeated ZANU-PF in parliamentary elections. Following his bitter defeat in the referendum, and newly vulnerable to an organized opposition, Mugabe launched his program of farm confiscation from whites—accompanied by demagogic rhetoric.

Ahead of presidential elections in 2002, Mugabe pushed through a law limiting freedom of the press. ZANU-PF also introduced more restrictive citizenship laws in a thinly veiled attempt to disenfranchise whites born in Zimbabwe. The wording of the new law also affected Zimbabweans with roots elsewhere in Africa.

Mugabe won re-election in March 2002 following the expulsion of the head of the EU election monitoring mission and that mission's withdrawal. Commonwealth and other observers condemned the electoral process as deeply flawed, prompting the EU to impose sanctions on Zimbabwe, and the Commonwealth to suspend its membership. Drought compounded the chaos in Zimbabwe's traditionally strong agricultural sector, sown by ill-conceived land re-distribution, and later in 2002 brought the country to the brink of famine.

With discontent once again mounting, the Mugabe regime launched a brutal crackdown on the MDC following a general strike in March 2003. MDC leader (and fellow Shona tribesman) Morgan Tsvangirai was arrested and charged with treason over an alleged plot to assassinate Mugabe. Zimbabwe's courts, which still retain vestiges of independence despite several years of overt political manipulation by the ZANU-PF government, have subsequently dismissed all charges against Tsvangirai.

In March 2005 voting for parliament, ZANU-PF regained the two-thirds majority it had lost in 2000. Domestic opponents and most international observers regarded the elections as deeply flawed. During the campaign, ZANU-PF turned the economic crisis to its advantage by withholding food aid from disproportionately Ndebele MDC supporters, while directing increased distribution to disproportionately Shona ZANU-PF supporters.

Its two-thirds parliamentary majority restored, Mugabe and ZANU-PF set about immediately to further

amend the constitution to their own ends. The executive gained more authority over electoral processes, the attorney general gained new powers, the government could now seize the passports of those deemed threats to national security, and a series of changes removed the possibility for white farmers to appeal through the courts the confiscation of their lands.

The leadership of the MDC has been Shona, in the shape of veteran leader, Morgan Tsvangirai and now the breakaway leader, Arthur Mutambara. But there has always been a strong contingent of Ndebele in the senior ranks of the MDC. The 2006 split within the MDC further emphasized the opposition's ethnic dimensions, with the Ndebele led by Secretary-General, Welshman Ncube, generally siding with the Mutambara faction.

Despite rigging the system in his favour and employing a range of intimidation tactics, Mugabe and ZANU-PF fared poorly in March 2008 parliamentary and presidential elections. The government election commission was slow to release results, some of which were subject to partial 'recounts'. Nonetheless, ZANU-PF lost its majority in parliament. Publication of the results in the presidential race took about a month – well beyond the legal deadline. When they were finally released, they showed the leader of the main MDC faction, Morgan Tsvangirai, with a slight lead over Mugabe. The MDC claimed that Tsvangirai received over half of the vote, and the US State Department agreed with the assessment. However, in the delayed official count, Tsvangirai's total came to less than 50 per cent of the vote, necessitating a second-round run-off against Mugabe. The government continued its campaign of violence and intimidation ahead of the scheduled June run-off. Morgan Tsvangirai pulled out of the election the week before the scheduled vote, citing extensive violence against his supporters. His claims were supported by African and other international observers, as well as governments around the world. Some African leaders called on Mugabe to step down in the wake of 'sham' elections, but South African President Thabo Mbeki – leading the government with the most international sway over Zimbabwe – remained set on his long-standing strategy of quiet persuasion. Former South African President Nelson Mandela, however, condemned Mugabe's 'tragic failure of leadership'.

The efforts of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) finally resulted in a settlement between Mugabe and the two fractions of the MDC and in September 2008 Mugabe agreed on a power-sharing deal. However, Mugabe's rejection to hand over key ministerial posts ended in a political deadlock that could only be resolved in January 2009 after Tsvangirai threatened to quit negotiations until authorities release MDC supporters and activists. In February 2009 Tsvangirai was sworn in as prime minister.

[^top](#)

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

In May 2005 Mugabe launched 'Operation Murambatsvina' ('clean out the filth' in Shona), a military-style slum clearance in the capital Harare, the Ndebele and MDC stronghold of Bulawayo, and elsewhere across the country. Ostensibly a campaign of urban clean-up, it did not go unnoticed that the urban poor targeted by the campaign are a key MDC constituency. A UN report estimated that by July 2005, the government's action had rendered 700,000 poor Zimbabweans homeless, and adversely affected around 2.4 million. In 2006, it was estimated that 85 per cent of Zimbabweans lived in poverty.

In 2007, the Zimbabwean crisis continued to accelerate, with grave implications for its citizens and for the region. In a September 2007 report, International Crisis Group reported 3000 Zimbabweans per day crossing into South Africa, as well as other Southern African countries. High levels of violence continued – targets were political, economic, and social. They ranged from teachers, students, street

vendors, and journalists, villagers trying to sell grain, human rights activists, and opposition politicians.

As the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum details, human rights abuses range from torture, violations of freedom of expression, movement and association, disappearances, unlawful arrest, and unlawful detention. The economy is in freefall. According to the BBC in November 2007, the country's chief statistician indicated that the inflation rate was incalculable, but some reports in November 2007 put it at near 15,000%.

In this atmosphere of crisis, there is a strong risk that existing ethnic and racial tensions could be even more gravely inflamed – especially with presidential and parliamentary elections slated for 2008. This is reflected in the MRG's [Peoples under Threat \(2009\)](#), where Zimbabwe is one of the fastest risers. Although as indicated above, the Zimbabwe regime attacks a wide-range of targets, two groups are particularly at risk: the Ndebele and European. The former particularly because there has been a previous episode of mass killing, targeted at this community.

The Ndebele's heartland is the South-Western territory of Matabele-land. In the years, immediately before and post-independence, rivalries between the majority Shona and the minority Ndebele were evident. The main resistance-movement to the racist regime of Ian Smith, were the Ndebele's ZAPU, led by Joshua Nkomo and the Shona's ZANU, led by Robert Mugabe. After independence, the Shona-dominated ZANU won the country's first free elections. Mugabe then moved to crush opposition among the Ndebele, embarking upon the 'Gukurahundi' pogrom. The killings, which continued from 1983 to 1987, resulted in an estimated 10,000–20,000 deaths.

Nevertheless, discrimination against the Ndebele continued. The Minorities At Risk (MAR) project notes that "There is massive unemployment and general social destitution in the area. Furthermore, although there are no restrictions to high office, civil servants in Matabeleland are disproportionately Shona, and do not even speak Ndebele". These issues have become particularly acute since the emergence of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC); Matabele-land is an opposition strong-hold.

MAR reports that in 2002, prior to the elections, ZANU-PF allegedly threatened the Ndebele with starvation, and a document surfaced which allegedly contained a plan to exterminate the Ndebele. In the heightened tensions in the run-up to the Spring 2008 elections, similar incidents may yet occur.

The leadership of the MDC – now split – has been Shona, in the shape of veteran leader, Morgan Tsvangirai and now the breakaway leader, Arthur Mutambara. But there has always been a strong contingent of Ndebele in the senior ranks of the MDC. The 2006 split within the MDC further emphasized the opposition's ethnic dimensions, with the Ndebele led by Secretary-General, Welshman Ncube, generally siding with the Mutambara faction.

Historically, Europeans owned half the arable land in country, and the large commercial farms supplied eighty-per cent of the national agricultural product (Minorities At Risk project, 2000). However, when the Mugabe government embarked on its forcible land seizures policy, ostensibly to re-distribute to landless black Zimbabweans, this group came severely under attack. Many fled the country – those that remain are still extremely vulnerable. The white population of Zimbabwe is vastly reduced, as farmers have fled to destinations including South Africa, the UK and Australia. Of some 4,000 white farmers in the 1990s, only around 400 remained in 2007, and the government announced that their farms would be taken in August 2007. Many whites have lost everything they owned. In addition to farmers, white civil servants who worked faithfully for the independent Zimbabwean state have been abandoned by their government and left impoverished. Much of the land seized has gone to individuals connected to the Mugabe elite, rather than to the landless.

Human rights and the humanitarian situation deteriorated sharply in the run-up to and after the elections in March 2008. Amnesty International reported at least 180 people dead and thousands injured, while tens of thousands were displaced. Acute hunger spreads over the country and by the end of 2008 alone over 1500 people were killed by cholera. In August 2009 the UN warned that the humanitarian situation remained grave, with not enough food to feed all 12.5 million Zimbabweans and funding requirements to provide urgently-needed aid only half met. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted that only 47%, less than half of the \$718 million needed to assist Zimbabwe has been committed until the second half of 2009. The OCHA and the Southern African nation recorded around 100,000 cases of cholera and more than 4,200 deaths between August 2008 and July 2009.

At the eve of the summit meeting of the heads of state from members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, on September 7 - 8 2009, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report demonstrating the government's lack of progress in its first six months. According to the report, the former ruling party, Zimbabwe Africa National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) has not demonstrated political will to introduce reforms and holds more power than the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), previously in opposition but now partner in government. The HRW report states that the police, state prosecutors, and court officials close to ZANU-PF 'conduct politically motivated prosecutions of MDC activists and legislators and fail to ensure justice for victims of abuses or to hold perpetrators of human rights violations to account'. The summit is expected to examine the country's compliance with a number of rulings by the SADC Tribunal on illegal land seizures in Zimbabwe and provide an overview of the progress made by Zimbabwe's power-sharing government.

[^top](#)