

# 'Zimbabwe Crisis, What Crisis?'

In mid-April 2008, Thabo Mbeki, the former South African president and Southern African Development Community (SADC) mediator in the political crisis engulfing Zimbabwe, was heavily criticised after asserting that ["there is no crisis in Zimbabwe"](#).

Apart from the immediate political crisis which Zimbabwe was reeling from, two weeks after the 29 [March](#) 2008 harmonised elections, the nation had reached its tipping point after enduring a decade-long crisis characterised by toxic politics, disputed elections, violence and a culture of impunity by the state.

On the economic front, Zimbabwe had experienced its worst [brain-drain](#) largely to neighbouring South Africa. The Zimbabwean dollar had become moribund with hyperinflation reducing the official tender to rubble.

Mbeki had made a stopover in Harare ahead of the [SADC emergency summit on the post-election impasse](#) in Lusaka which Robert Mugabe snubbed. Mbeki deliberately ignored the existence of an escalating crisis provoked by the withholding of the March 29 election results, which Robert Mugabe was believed to have lost to the former Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

The official results were announced six weeks later, with Tsvangirai garnering [47.87%](#) of the votes and Mugabe scoring [43.24%](#). Ultimately, the electoral impasse necessitated a "run-off" election, held on [June 27](#) 2008. But the run-off was characterised by state-orchestrated violence against MDC leaders and their supporters.

After Morgan Tsvangirai pulled out from the runoff owing to

the state-orchestrated violence, Robert Mugabe went ahead in this [one horserace](#), “winning” the election by a landslide and was hastily inaugurated as the president of Zimbabwe in ways reminiscent of Napoleon Bonaparte’s act of self-crowning as Emperor of the French!

Courtesy of the Thabo Mbeki-led peacebuilding efforts, Robert Mugabe, Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara (who was a leader of a “smaller” MDC faction) signed the [Global Political Agreement](#) (GPA) in September 2008, which provided a road map to resolving the challenges in Zimbabwe. In [February 2009](#), a historic reprieve came following the inception of the [Government of National Unity \(GNU\)](#).

### **Crisis of values**

Mbeki’s experience in mediating in Zimbabwe is crucial to understand the complexity of the task which President Cyril Ramaphosa’s envoys were faced with. The envoys included Dr Sydney Mufamadi (who led the team), former Speaker of South African Parliament Baleka Mbete and former South African Minister of Public Service Advocate Ngoako Ramatlhodi (who met President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa on 10 August during Zimbabwe’s Heroes Day commemorations).

To South Africa, the envoys sought to engage with Mnangagwa [“following recent reports of difficulties that the Republic of Zimbabwe is experiencing”](#).

Although the talks were understandably couched in diplomatic parlance, it was ironic that the discussions on the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe were being held on a day Zimbabwe was celebrating the heroic sacrifices of its “gallant sons and daughters of the soil” who fought against Ian Smith’s repressive system.

That a country which South Africa looked up to for inspiration during its apartheid days was now holding a reception to South African envoys following its human rights abuses is an

indictment of Zimbabwe's liberation legacy and its claim of upholding sacrosanct rights after independence.

The visit by the South African envoys was propelled by a powerful #ZimbabweLivesMatter social movement which amplified the state's heavy-handedness following the arrest of investigative journalist [Hopewell Chin'ono](#) and opposition leader [Jacob Ngarivhume](#) who had intended to lead a protest against widespread [corruption, state profligacy, poor healthcare system](#) and other demands on 31 July 2020.

While the government may have cracked down on dissenting voices, the #ZimbabweLivesMatter Movement managed to attract the attention of [Moussa Faki](#), the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, who expressed concerns over the deteriorating human rights situation in the country. The movement has also attracted the attention of the [United Nations](#). Other notable voices who have criticised Harare's handling of human rights include Botswana's former president [Ian Khama](#) and a host of unlikely figures including American rapper [Ice Cube](#).

Following the visit by the envoys, it was evident that there was confusion between South Africa and Zimbabwe over the terms of reference and scope of the mission. The South African Embassy in Harare had advised the MDC Alliance that the envoys [would meet with them after meeting Mnangagwa](#) in line with the spirit of inclusivity and dialogue on behalf of President Ramaphosa.

The dialogue, which became a monologue, started off on a bad note.

Under unclear circumstances, the envoys ended up meeting with Mnangagwa without engaging with the main opposition MDC Alliance.

To argue that the envoys were only meant to interact with Mnangagwa and return to their principal Ramaphosa in line with

protocol sounds ridiculous in a fractured country with an undying crisis and in need of inclusive solutions.

Unfortunately, Zimbabwe's information minister Monica Mutsvangwa characterised the discussions with South Africa as ["peer to peer"](#) talk and further watered down the presence of a crisis. She argued that Zimbabwe does not require an ["external intervention"](#) in her puerile regurgitation of the hard-line stance taken by the ruling [Zanu PF](#) which does not see the MDC Alliance as a stakeholder, contrary to Ramaphosa's views.

It is very unfortunate that Mnangagwa who spoke the good news some three years ago has now resorted to threatening Zimbabweans, vowing to ["flush out"](#) political opponents in the country. When the MDC Alliance talks about Zimbabwe degenerating into a "securocratic" state, there is no need to look beyond Mnangagwa who never disappoints in words and actions.

### **The complexity of the Zim mission**

The South African envoys face an uphill task, just like Mbeki, even though Mbeki's mission was somewhat different. During Mbeki's exile in Zimbabwe in the 80s, Robert Mugabe hosted him. So it was widely believed Mbeki had bias towards Mugabe. Mbeki's mediation in Zimbabwe's crisis further confirmed the expected lenience in engaging with a "sister liberation movement". Dr Mufamadi and his team face a similar challenge on account of what is believed to be a strong personal relationship between Mufamadi and President Emmerson Mnangagwa.

Already, there is a widespread belief that the cancellation of the intended meeting with the MDC Alliance confirms the envoys' compromising position.

Even back home in South Africa, Ramaphosa's efforts and choice of envoys have to contend with the growing outspokenness by

the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the Democratic Alliance (D.A) who disapproved Mnangagwa's complicity in human rights abuses, which ultimately led to the engagements with Harare.

Within the ANC, there is growing criticism about the Zimbabwean crisis, with senior party figures blaming Mnangagwa's government for complicity in the country's growing problems.

Just recently, Lindiwe Zulu, the ANC chair of the International Relations Committee, bemoaned that Zimbabweans have lost their [dignity](#), which is why they were now doing menial jobs in South Africa. Zulu, just like Acie Magashule's diagnosis of the Zimbabwean crisis, agrees with Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande's views years back in which Nzimande chastised the ruling Zanu PF's tendency to [put the blame elsewhere](#) for its governance complicity!

Lindiwe Zulu (who was heavily involved in the Jacob Zuma-led electoral road map after Mbeki's departure for the 2013 elections) had to contend being derogatorily called a ["stupid idiotic street woman"](#) by Robert Mugabe, on account of the assertive posture which South Africa expressed towards Zimbabwe.

Beyond the internal contradictions in the ANC, the envoys also have to contend with having an extremely limited scope in addressing the Zimbabwean problem unlike the Mbeki-led efforts which led to the GNU. Although the GNU was an imperfect political arrangement, it brought reprieve to suffering Zimbabweans.

Mnangagwa is now in the middle of his presidential term, while Chamisa has growingly become distrustful of any political arrangement with a "dishonest" Zanu PF, which effectively throws away any realisation of a GNU.

It is difficult to comprehend how the envoys will achieve

success, especially considering that Mnangagwa, who should have directly engaged with Nelson Chamisa after the 2018 elections, elected to form the Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD) forum comprising political nonentities.

Considering these facts, it seems the envoys will continue to shuttle between Zimbabwe and South Africa until the next elections are held, without any tangible progress.

Although the envoys will be guided by the need to ensure state cohesion, peace and the enthronement of human rights in Zimbabwe, the envoys face a complex task in an environment where the government remains intransigent about the existence of a crisis. On the other hand, the opposition and the generality of Zimbabweans continue to yearn for a “normal” environment, which appears elusive, at least for now.

One thing is clear, however: Zimbabwe is in a full-blown crisis!