

Zimbabwe: A Country to be Born Again

Oskar Wermter SJ

As Zimbabwe waits for the results of Saturday's elections to be announced, Oskar Wermter SJ, a parish priest in Harare, writes about his experience in the last years and this last weekend, about what might happen next and what the country needs now.

The slogan “Mugabe must go. Taneta (We are tired of him)” was painted on walls in my neighbourhood years ago and has been there ever since. Mbare, a socially depressed working class district, has voted consistently for the opposition. In 2005 the old man took his revenge: Operation Clean-up started in Mbare. Hundreds of little brick cottages people had built without licence in response to the failure of government to provide “housing for all by the year 2000” were demolished. The funds had been plundered by party leaders, among them the First Lady. Thousands became homeless, many still are.

“Soon after Independence, the power and wealth of the tiny white Rhodesian elite was appropriated by an equally black elite, some of whom have governed the country for the past 27 years through political patronage. Black Zimbabweans today fight for the same basic rights they fought for during the liberation struggle,” wrote the Catholic Bishops a year ago in their pastoral letter, *God Hears the Cry of the Oppressed*.

The majority of Mbare residents who came to the polling station in our church/school compound voted for the opposition. But a sizeable number still voted for the “ruling party”. Why? The Bishops put their fingers on it: patronage. In this part of the world politics is about getting rich or at least getting “favours”. “You vote for me and I look after you,” the Big Man in politics says.

That is why an election is a desperate battle over life and death. Lose an election and you lose your livelihood. You have to be economically secure to be able to afford defeat in politics. “Be magnanimous in victory and gracious in defeat. Losing candidates and parties in a free and fair election do not find it difficult to accept defeat,” wrote the Bishops for this election in a



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letter which sounded like lesson number one in a correspondence course on democracy. The young party thugs, unemployed and destitute, who go round beating up opposition supporters in return for free beer do not know what “gracious” means, let alone “magnanimous”.

Your opponent is your enemy who must be destroyed. The freedom fighters of the bush war against white racism who became today’s “ruling party” have never given up violence. They have buried the hatchet, but can unearth it again any time. “Bash them,” the old guerilla leader told his police, and Morgan Tsvangirai who looks as if he won this election and should be the new president was so badly beaten by police a year ago that he needed extensive hospital treatment.

Mrs Mapuranga is a very ordinary Mbare woman, just concerned about her family and shying away from politics. Last year she happened to get mixed up in a demonstration of the National Constitutional Assembly. She was so cruelly thrashed, she woke up in hospital and was unable to walk properly for almost three months.

The WOZA women (Women of Zimbabwe Arise!) launched a report a week ago, “The effects of fighting repression with love”. These mothers who shun violence, even verbal, have gone through hell. One reported how she was systematically beaten across her breasts which took weeks to heal and kicked with heavy police boots in the lower abdomen, the womb, which is the source of life. What these monsters are doing, they are doing to their own mothers. “Can’t we teach the police human rights?” someone asked naively. “We tried,” was the answer, “but they told us in here in the police station, ‘we are the masters, there are no human rights or rights of whatever sort here.’” Once something is

called “political” in Zimbabwe the rule of law no longer applies. Politics is lawless. How will politicians and their henchmen ever regain their humanity? How will Zimbabwe ever return to *unhu/ubuntu* – traditional African values meaning humanity, humaneness, community, solidarity?

Traditional African leadership based on consensus was corrupted by authoritarian colonial administrators; the armed revolutionary struggle against the colonial regime, now forever glorified in a cult of celebrating war and violence, did not prepare us for a free and tolerant society, or the ruthless command structure of a guerilla army for participatory democracy. The old man has mentally never left the trenches of that war (1972 – 1979), and he is still fighting the “colonial masters”, Britain, the West, colonialism and imperialism, and fellow African leaders see in him too the past hero of the struggle for liberation from the colonial yoke, which is why they forgive him even crimes against humanity, for example the murder of 20,000 civilians in the war against “dissidents” in Matabeleland in the mid-1980s.

Election day was peaceful. There was a polling station in our school yard. People lined up in long queues. No problem with discipline. Certain British habits have become part of our local culture. I went there thinking I might take a few pictures. But there were too many police. They don’t like cameras. Paranoia about “spies” is quite widespread among officials. So I left my camera in my pocket.

A young fellow Jesuit, a teacher at the school, pulled his camera out anyhow and started shooting. The police pounced, and he was their guest for the night in an overcrowded police cell. Father Provincial, our superior, famous as a skilled negotiator with government, got him out by Sunday lunchtime.

There was some concern that people would not have enough time to fill in their four ballot papers, to vote for the president, a member of parliament, senator and local councillor. But less than 50% of voters turned up, I was told. My own estimate was higher: every voter, having cast his/her ballot paper, had to dip his/her finger in some red indelible ink to prevent people from voting a second time. Most of our parishioners at Mass yesterday (Sunday) morning had “red fingers”.

The election officials were obliged to post the local election result outside the polling station for all to see.

Our parishioners took a look on Sunday morning before entering church for Mass. The results were the same throughout: the opposition led with a clear majority. The “ruling party” knew it had lost the urban voters. And this time, for the first time, the rural voters were sufficiently bitter and worn out by hunger and destitution to opt for the opposition. Up till recently the villages had been forbidden territory for the opposition parties. The rural areas were simply a “One-Party-State”. Mugabe had long argued that “consensus democracy” was the appropriate African form of democracy. For a time people even believed it until they realized it was just a disguise for his “One-Man-Dictatorship”.

The main opposition party has collated the results from the polling station and is said to have won comfortably. Now people wait for the official announcements and are deeply suspicious that the figures may be cooked at the “central command centre” of the Electoral Commission which is not an independent body, but one appointed by the president and main contender. Up to this moment figures have only been released for the parliamentary elections. But the votes for the president are crucial. According to the present constitution he has such wide powers, he can rule, by-passing parliament, and has done so often enough, especially spending lots of money not budgeted for, which explains our astronomical inflation.

The end is near. Whether the breakthrough comes now or later in the year, time is up. But a change of government is only a first step. This country has to be rebuilt completely. It has to be reborn. We need to look truth in the eye once more, after so much false propaganda, deception and fraud. We need reconciliation, after so much hatred, murder and violence, so many wounds, so much bitterness. The rule of law has to be reestablished. We need a new constitution with separation of powers to prevent absolute power to be placed in the hands of one man.

We need a government that respects even the citizens opposed to it and is committed to the welfare of all, not only of their own party supporters, as in the past semi-feudal state which is now collapsing. Zimbabwe needs to be reborn.

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