

## Political Risk Alert (20 Aug. 2019)

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### **Zimbabwe: Government clampdown could escalate**

**Event:** On August 19, police in Bulawayo banned a planned demonstration by the main opposition party.

**Significance:** The ban was the second against a demonstration planned by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) in recent days. As fears grow among the ruling ZANU-PF government of a popular uprising that could tap into deep public dissatisfaction with the state of the economy, the security forces are intensifying the clampdown on opposition and civil society figures. A recent scandal over the looting of pension funds by officials has undermined already fragile confidence in government, while a potential increase in public sector wages may have set back hopes of IMF assistance.

**Analysis:** Official figures showed that annual inflation reached 175% in June. Soon after these figures were announced, Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube ordered a six-month blackout on publishing further data. Officially, this is to take account of changes earlier this year from a multi-currency regime to a new, de facto local currency, the 'Zimbabwean dollar'. Unofficial independent projections put inflation at approximately 570%, the second highest rate in the world after Venezuela.

Unsurprisingly, wages have not kept pace and many of the country's 400,000 civil servants now reportedly earn less than the World Bank poverty line of 1.9 dollars a day. There are shortages of key medicines, food, water and fuels, and what is being sold in stores is largely unaffordable.

On August 17, the Zimbabwe Hospitals Doctors Association demanded a salary increase and announced their intention to embark on strike action within 21 days.

Zimbabwe is also experiencing a devastating drought that now looks as though it will leave 5.5 million people, some 60% of the rural population, with insufficient food by early 2020. Electricity is also in short supply. This is partly due to the impact of the drought on hydroelectric supplies but more to the country's unpaid debts to South Africa's state-owned power utility, Eskom, which has recently led to power being switched off for up to 18 hours a day. This has hit businesses and industry hard and will worsen the projected economic contraction this year.

Ncube has said that austerity measures will remain in place until at least January 2020, when Harare plans to begin re-engaging with international lenders and settle its outstanding debts of some nine billion dollars. However, IMF Resident Representative Patrick Imam has said conditions are not yet in place for the fund to provide financial support to Zimbabwe.

Fearful of a Sudan-style uprising, President Mnangagwa's government has been attempting to dampen public dissent while simultaneously 'coup-proofing' the country's military. A consistent low-level crackdown has been in operation since early 2019, with many activists abducted, beaten, arrested and facing questionable charges. The government has unsuccessfully tried to distance itself from the violence, blaming much of it on an unidentified 'third force'.

Meanwhile, Mnangagwa this month promised the military salary increases and other benefits to cushion them against rising inflation. This follows reshuffles within the military earlier this year and a spending spree in June, which saw the army reportedly purchase water cannons, teargas and thousands of new guns that included some 3,500 new semi-automatic rifles and 300 sniper rifles. In addition, a large number of police officers have been undergoing paramilitary-style training in preparation for unrest.

In early August, the opposition MDC-T and allied civil society groups announced a series of demonstrations calling on the government to address the economic crisis, beginning on August 16 in Harare. Others were scheduled for Bulawayo on August 19, Gweru on August 20, Masvingo on August 21 and Mutare on August 22.

While the MDC-T submitted the necessary documents for their protest two weeks in advance, as required, the authorities banned the march on August 15, with the High Court upholding that decision the following day. Nevertheless, a few hundred people gathered in the city centre and, in a manner similar to the brutal breaking up of protests earlier this year, police responded by violently attacking and rounding up protesters. NGOs report that 128 people were arrested, and twelve people required medical attention following beatings. Since then, several more activists and opposition leaders have been arrested, including eight MDC-T leaders in Bulawayo.

This latest clampdown will deepen international concern in Western capitals that Harare is reverting to type and does not seriously intend to make any political reforms. Economic normalisation now appears to be even more unlikely.

In March, US President Donald Trump extended sanctions on top military figures and some government-owned companies for a further year. Earlier this month, the US government also added the former head of the presidential guard, Anselm Sanyatwe, to the sanctions list for his alleged role in last year's post-election killings.

The EU's delegation to Zimbabwe has condemned the latest protest bans, and expressed concern about the intimidation, harassment and torture of political activists. This was echoed by similar condemnations by the US Embassy in Harare, the US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Regionally, however, Harare has received tacit support. At the latest Southern African Development Community (SADC) Heads of State and Government meeting in Dar es Salaam last week, the new SADC Chairperson, Tanzanian President John Magufuli, called for international sanctions against Zimbabwe to be dropped. At the meeting, Mnangagwa was elected chairperson of SADC's regional body for politics, defence and security. Given the enhanced importance of Mnangagwa and Magufuli within SADC, the organisation will almost certainly refrain from any overt criticism of Harare's actions over the short term.

**Looking ahead:** While ZANU-PF fears of Western-backed 'regime change' is largely misguided, the MDC-T hopes to unsettle the government through protest and push it into negotiations on political and economic reforms. Harare's international re-engagement strategy will remain incoherent and contradictory, but it will face little or no censure from its regional partners. Harare will intensify economic reform measures, but Western governments will likely withhold greater support in the absence of any significant political reform.

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