

The stolen Zimbabwean presidential election ranks as the biggest corruption scandal to rock the crisis-riddled country in 2008. The March 29 election pitted incumbent President Robert Mugabe against his nemesis, opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

It took more than a month for the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), the body charged with conducting all elections, to announce the election's results.

"No candidate has received a majority of the total number of valid votes cast," Lovemore Sekeramayi, ZEC's constituency officer, told reporters at a press conference in Harare on May 2, 2008. "The provision of Section 110 (3) of the Electoral Act, Chapter 2:13, applies, and a second election shall be held on a date to be advised by the commission. According to Section 110 (4) of the Electoral Act, the two candidates who received the highest and second highest numbers of valid votes cast shall be eligible to contest the second election. Accordingly, Tsvangirai and Mugabe are eligible to contest in the second election."

Now the prime minister in Mugabe's coalition government, Tsvangirai, had outpolled Mugabe by more than 200,000 votes in the initial election. He attributes the delay in announcing the results to an attempt to tinker with the election's outcome.

Marauding Militia

The run-up to the June 27, 2008, run-off sparked violence that led to Tsvangirai pulling out of the race. Mugabe deployed more than 200 senior army officers to take charge of his violent campaign. They created no-go areas for Tsvangirai and his officials, and Mugabe's marauding militia killed more than 500 of Tsvangirai's supporters in cold blood (the number is still debatable in Zimbabwe).

Mugabe then proceeded to campaign in the one-man race. The outcome was declared a sham both regionally and internationally. The outcry forced the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union (AU) and former South African President Thabo Mbeki to broker a shaky Government of National Unity (GNU), which was inaugurated on Feb. 2009, to accommodate the "winner."

"It's one of the most gigantic electoral frauds in the history of Zimbabwe," says Okay Machisa, director of ZimRights,

a human rights watchdog based in the capital, Harare. “Nothing can surpass that stolen election. The country is in a crisis because of the systematic rigging, human rights abuses and violence that followed after Mugabe lost the initial presidential election to Tsvangirai.”

The Zimbabwe African National Union — Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and President Mugabe’s aids have continuously denied stealing the election, claiming that Tsvangirai failed to garner more than 51 percent of the votes cast. “That’s why we had a run-off which was overwhelmingly won by President Mugabe,” said Emmerson Mnangagwa, Mugabe’s chief campaign manager, when asked about the allegations.

However, Tendai Biti, Tsvangirai’s secretary general and MDC chief negotiator in the coalition government, maintained that the elections were stolen through vote rigging and the use of violence allegedly by Mugabe’s agent provocateurs. Tsvangirai boycotted the run-off citing violence.

“We won the elections. We have the true mandate of the people to form the new government. However, we have been forced into this animal called the GNU (Government of National Unity) to save lives as well as take this country forward. But if truth is told, Morgan Richard Tsvangirai and the MDC won the presidential and parliamentary elections. State security agents, the army and police were accomplices to the whole scandal,” said Biti.

With the formation of the power-sharing government in February 2009 have come attempts to reform the electoral body. To avoid vote-rigging and other fraudulent activities that have plagued Zimbabwe’s electoral system, the Electoral Commission, previously packed with Mugabe’s sycophants, now includes members acceptable to civil society organizations and all three political parties in the coalition government.

Other Areas of Abuse

John Maketo, a senior program officer with Transparency International Zimbabwe (TIZ), concurred that although corruption in Zimbabwe has manifested itself in various forms, the controversy surrounding Mugabe’s contentious re-election took center stage in 2008.

“High-profile corruption cases ranged from politically motivated abuse of power to grand economic enrichment, mostly by people of influence and power,” Maketo says. “In June 2008, the nation witnessed electoral corruption at its

peak, as the Zimbabwe African National Union — Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) used violence, intimidation and exclusion to entrench its position in power and government. The one-man election was widely condemned by local and international observers as a violation of people's political rights to decide their governors. State resources, through the Farm Mechanization Program, were also abused on a massive scale in order to buy votes.”

More than 10 legislators have appeared in the country's courts for abusing the Farm Mechanization Program — the program Mugabe used as sweetener to buy votes. However, many cases involving ZANU PF legislators have inexplicably been dropped by the courts.

“On the economic front, people of influence and power continued to massively loot national resources at the expense of ordinary people and national development,” Maketo added.

Citing army generals' looting of diamonds at the Chiadzwa Diamonds Fields in eastern Zimbabwe, in which more than 500 civilians were allegedly killed between 2008 and 2009 (the number is still debatable in Zimbabwe), Maketo says there was evidence that politicians and their associates enriched themselves by illegally extracting and smuggling the precious mineral out of the country before hiding the proceeds in off-shore accounts.

Illegal Land-Grabs

The state of corruption in Zimbabwe cannot be fully exposed without mentioning various incidents of illegal land-grabbing by individuals of influence and power, despite the formation of the inclusive government. This tactic makes the land-grabbers owners of multiple farms while there are millions of landless Zimbabweans. At the time of this writing, about 300 out of 6,500 white farmers were under siege from raiding Mugabe hatchet men as they continued his policy to expropriate land, using the pretext that he is addressing a wrong left by colonial rule, which ended in 1980.

A report released by the General Agriculture and Plantations Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) in August 2009 reveals that more than 66,000 farm workers had been left homeless as a result of illegal land grabs. The report, entitled *Fresh Invasions and Challenges Faced by Farm Workers in Zimbabwe*, claims the land-grabbers hired armed police to force the farm workers off farms.

“Farm workers have been turned into nomads,” reads part of the GAPWUZ report, which was presented to Prime Minister Tsvangirai.

The “financial” or “cash” crisis in the banking sector also created an environment conducive to fortune-making by corrupt individuals who perpetuate the black market, making life very difficult for ordinary citizens. One of the most scandalous cases involved the controversial governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, Gideon Gono, who illegally withdrew money from the foreign-currency accounts of nongovernmental organizations, individuals, companies and embassies, allegedly to bankroll Mugabe’s electioneering as well as to fund his operations. Gono, who, rightly or wrongly, is also mentioned as one of the most corrupt individuals in Zimbabwe, publicly admitted that the Central Bank raided accounts of nongovernmental organizations to the tune of about US\$1 billion.

In attempts to nip corruption in the bud, the coalition government has proposed setting up an independent anti-corruption commission through the bicameral Parliament, but doubts exist about whether it will be given arrest and prosecutorial powers. An anti-corruption commission set up in the previous Mugabe administration did not enjoy much success: it fingered only small fry in corrupt activities instead of known senior politicians in the former ruling party, ZANU PF.

Vehement Opposition to Reforms

Attempts by independent bodies and corruption watchdogs to rally Zimbabweans against corruption have met with vehement opposition from ZANU PF members and other politicians who have benefited from Mugabe’s politics of patronage. Transparency International Zimbabwe (TIZ), a local corruption watchdog, established the Advocacy and Legal Advisory Center (ALAC) in January 2009 to keep track of vice and graft in Zimbabwe, but it has faced harassment and intimidation from politicians and people benefiting from corrupt activities.

According to a report TIZ released on Aug. 28, 2009, the Zimbabwean public continues to complain about officials entrusted with public procurement who receive or solicit bribes in order to award tenders.

“The distribution of farming equipment and farm implements, such as grinding mills, fuel and scotch carts, has largely been corrupt as responsible officials, like members of Parliament, district administrators and agricultural extension officers, allegedly abused their

offices to enrich themselves,” Mary-Jane Ncube, national director of TIZ, wrote in her monthly report on corruption trends in Zimbabwe.

“According to TIZ ALAC Updates, published monthly since April 2009, the police force ranked high among other sectors as the most prone to corruption,” she wrote. “The private sector and the judiciary have also performed very badly, according to the updates.”

Stung by ALAC’s success in urging Zimbabweans to report corrupt activities, Mugabe’s spin-doctors at the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) pulled a public awareness advertisement about corruption off the air on Aug. 26, 2009 — a month before the end of its scheduled run. The TIZ-sponsored and -funded ad lamented the alarming levels of corruption in Zimbabwe and called on the public to report cases of graft to the organization’s ALAC. Hapison Muchechetere, chief executive officer of ZBC, said the ad was pulled because it propagated “an agenda of foreign powers that want to paint all Zimbabweans as corrupt.”

He charged that corruption is an “imported Western idea and a debatable concept.” He argued that corruption is an abstract issue that is not a “priority in Zimbabwe right now.”

Reverend Useni Sibanda, coordinator of the Christian Alliance of Zimbabwe, summed it up when he said: “A fish starts rotting from the head. Maybe that’s why corruption is on the rise because it stems from the head who stole the elections.”

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