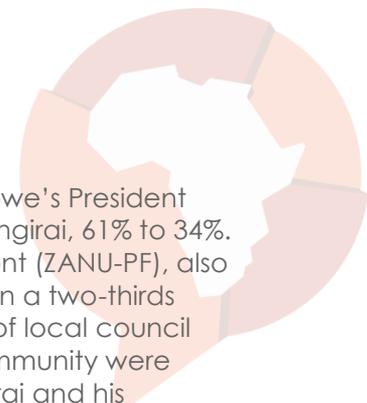


MDC-T defeat in Zimbabwe: Was it only due to intimidation?

By Stephen Ndoma



Introduction

In the relatively peaceful harmonized elections of July 2013, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe overwhelmingly defeated challenger Morgan Tsvangirai, 61% to 34%. Mugabe's party, the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), also won 158 of the country's 210 parliamentary seats, giving it more than a two-thirds majority in the lower House of Assembly, as well as a large majority of local council seats. Some parts of Zimbabwean society and the international community were shocked by the outcome, given the strong performance of Tsvangirai and his Movement for Democratic Change–Tsvangirai (MDC-T) in previous elections. In fact, Tsvangirai had outpolled Mugabe in the first round of the March 2008 presidential elections before withdrawing from a runoff that he described as a “violent sham” that endangered his supporters.

The inconclusive 2008 elections led to the power-sharing Government of National Unity (GNU), established in February 2009, under which Mugabe retained the presidency while Tsvangirai became prime minister. The GNU was expected to steer Zimbabwe through its transition and eventually be terminated after the holding of free, fair, and credible elections. Following voters' overwhelming endorsement of a new Constitution in March 2013, the results of the July 2013 elections left many observers shaking their heads in disbelief.

The MDC-T charged electoral chicanery and described the outcome as “heavily manipulated” and “illegitimate.” One of the reasons for the ZANU-PF victory most frequently cited by the MDC-T and some civil society organisations is that the use of political intimidation and violence in election campaigns has worked against the MDC-T's march toward State House. What accounts for the resurgence of the ZANU-PF and the dismal performance of the MDC-T? Is fear of political violence the only salient factor in the MDC-T's loss in the watershed elections?

Using data from Afrobarometer surveys in Zimbabwe, this paper argues that fear of political violence, though real, is not the most important explanatory variable accounting for the opposition's defeat. Instead, most voters were casting their ballots on the basis of their changing evaluations of the principals, Tsvangirai and Mugabe.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

The data used in developing this paper comes from Afrobarometer surveys conducted in Zimbabwe in 2005, 2009, 2010, and 2012. Sample sizes in 2005, 2009, and 2010 were about 1,200, yielding results with a sampling margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. In 2012, the sample size was doubled to 2,400, reducing the sampling margin of error to +/-2%.

Key findings

- The proportion of Zimbabweans who fear political intimidation or violence during election campaigns has declined but is still alarmingly high – especially among supporters of the MDC-T.
- Public approval ratings for Tsvangirai, while consistently higher than for Mugabe, declined between 2009 and 2012, while Mugabe's approval ratings increased sharply.

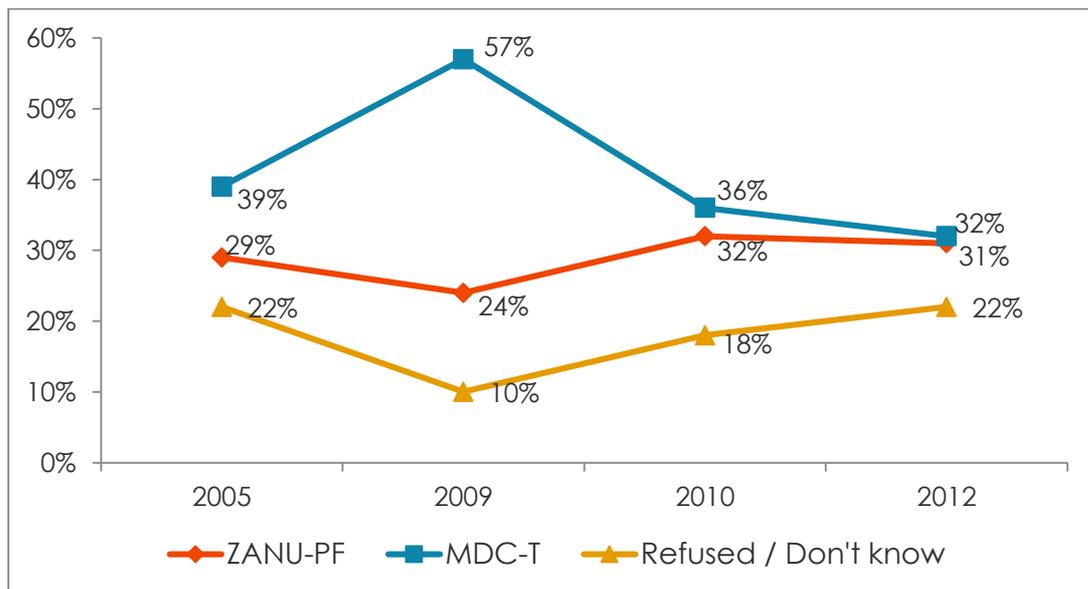
- Public trust reflected the same trends – decreasing trust in Tsvangirai and increasing trust in Mugabe.



Voting intentions 2005-2012

Voting intentions, as reflected in responses to the survey question, *If a presidential election were to be held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*, show a high level of support for Tsvangirai in May 2009, three months after the formation of the GNU. This is consistent with his strong electoral performance in 2008. But this support dropped by more than 20 percentage points in 2010 and 2012, while support for Mugabe increased by 8 to 9 percentage points (Figure 1). In all surveys except 2009, about one in five respondents declined to state a preference.

Figure 1: Professed voting intentions | Zimbabwe | 2005-2012



Respondents were asked: *If a presidential election were to be held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

Fear of political intimidation or violence

The surveys show extremely high levels of fear of political intimidation or violence during election time. More than eight in 10 respondents said they feared political intimidation or violence at least “a little bit,” with majorities of those expressing “a lot” of fear (Figure 2). Although fear declined from a high of 92% in 2009, after the violent 2008 presidential runoff campaign period, to 81% in 2010 and 2012, fear levels remain alarming in a polity where election outcomes are heavily contested.

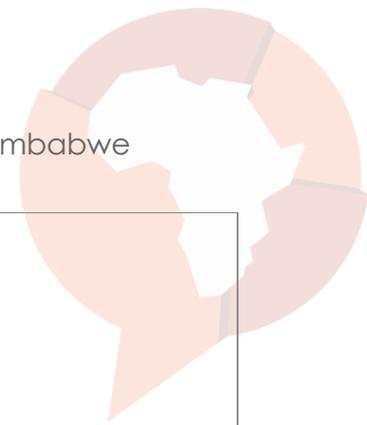
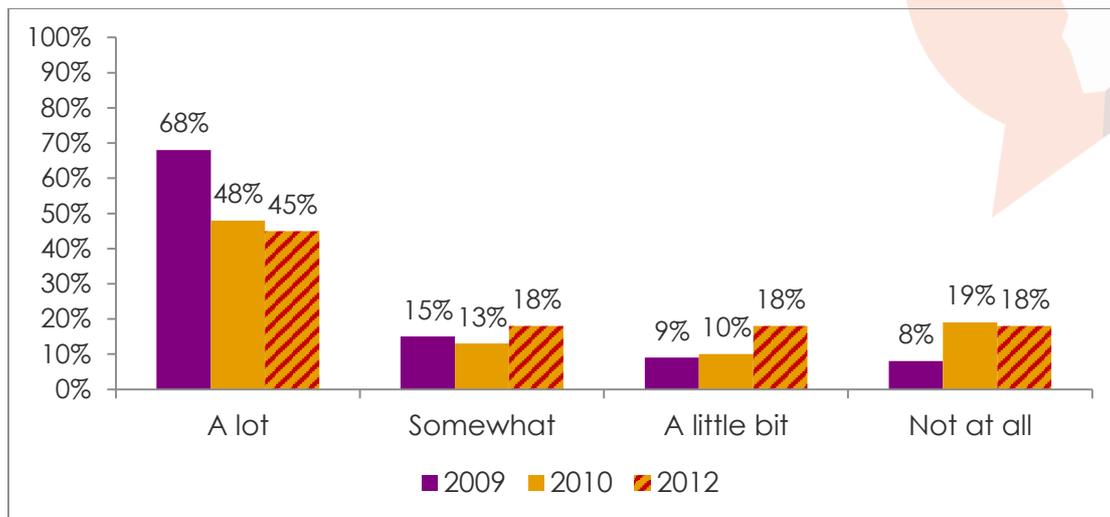


Figure 2: Trends in fear of political intimidation or violence | Zimbabwe
| 2009-2012

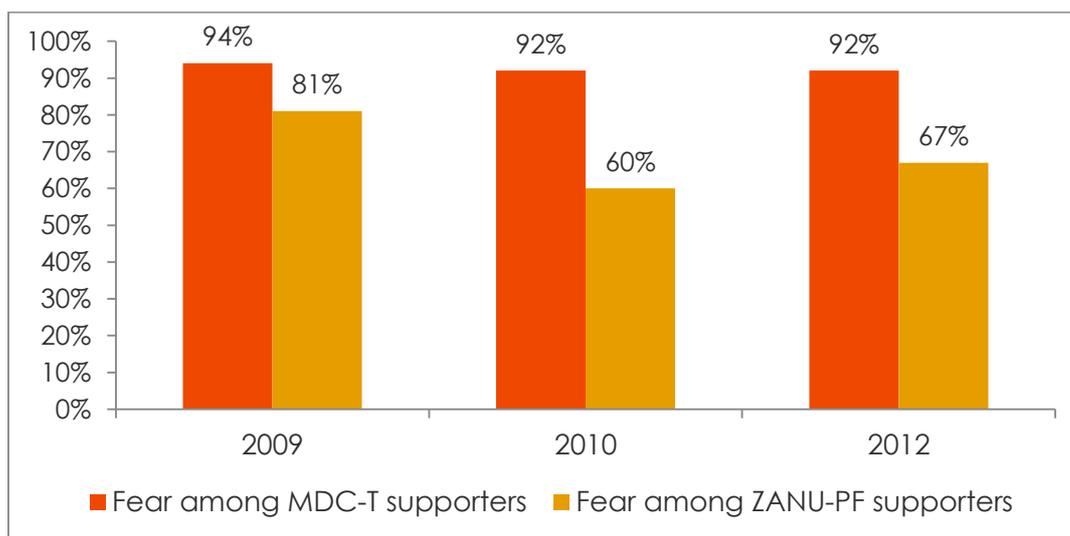


Respondents were asked: *During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?*

Does fear shape voting intentions?

Does fear of intimidation or violence shape voting intentions in Zimbabwe? And can this explain the MDC-T's electoral defeat to the ZANU-PF in July 2013? The data show that fear of political intimidation or violence is evident in Zimbabwe's politics and does appear to be related to voting intentions. In the 2009, 2010, and 2012 surveys, MDC-T supporters were significantly more afraid of political intimidation or violence than ZANU-PF supporters.

Figure 3: Fear of political intimidation or violence and voting intentions
| Zimbabwe | 2009-2012



(% who feared political intimidation or violence "a lot," "somewhat," or "a little bit")

Figure 3 shows that in May 2009, 11 months after the June 2008 runoff election, levels of fear were high among both ZANU-PF and MDC-T supporters. One can speculate that during this period, both ZANU-PF and MDC-T supporters were still recovering from the traumatic experiences of the terror that characterised the run-up to the presidential runoff elections. This scenario is likely because the terror unleashed in the

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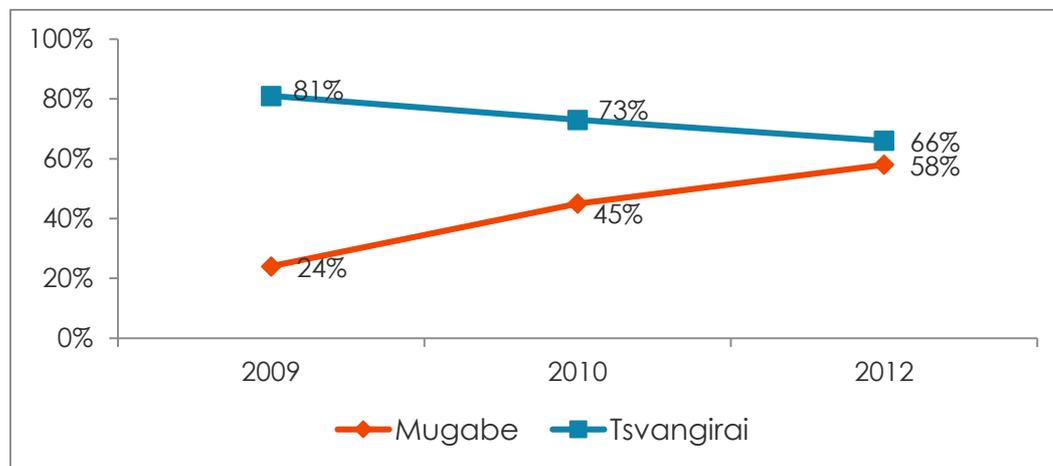
heavily militarised 2008 elections did not discriminate on the basis of party affiliation as the ZANU-PF sought to ensure support after its near-defeat by the MDC-T in the relatively peaceful March 2008 harmonised elections.

While fear levels among MDC-T supporters remained above 90% through 2010 and 2012, they declined from 81% to 60% – still a majority – among ZANU-PF supporters in 2010 and 67% in 2012.

Performance and public trust: Mugabe vs. Tsvangirai

Public approval ratings for President Mugabe and then-Prime Minister Tsvangirai show contrasting trends over the review period. As Figure 4 shows, Mugabe consistently received lower performance approval ratings than Tsvangirai. But Mugabe's approval ratings were on an upward trend, more than doubling, while Tsvangirai's were on a downward drift.

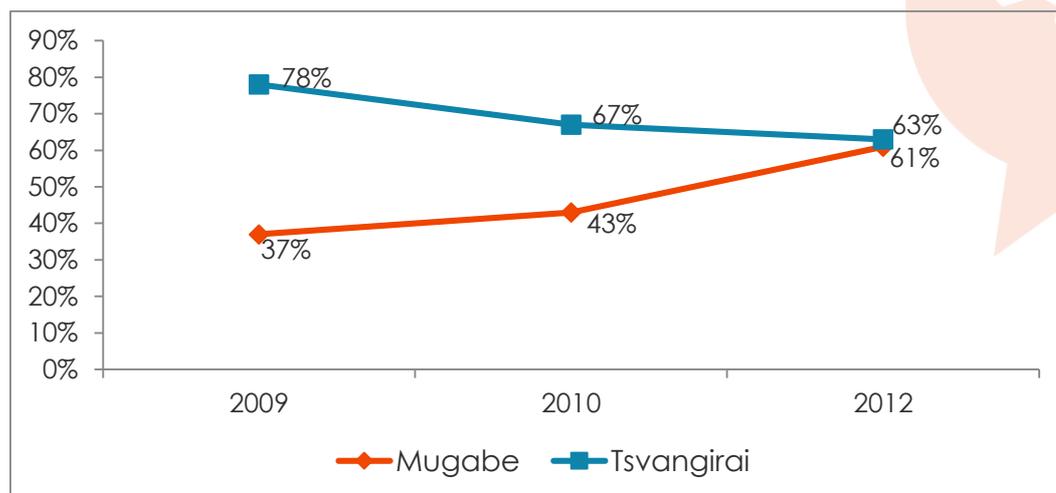
Figure 4: Trends in approval ratings for Mugabe and Tsvangirai | Zimbabwe | 2009-2012



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who said "approve" or "strongly approve")

Like public assessments of the two leaders' performance, the public's trust shows contrasting fortunes. As shown in Figure 5, the proportion of Zimbabweans who said they trusted Mugabe "a lot" or "somewhat" was at a low of 37% in May 2009 but then rose to 61% by July 2012. On the contrary, trust in Tsvangirai was at a high point of 78% in May 2009 but declined to 63% by July 2012.

Figure 5: Trends in trust in Mugabe and Tsvangirai | Zimbabwe | 2009-2012



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who said "a lot" or "somewhat")

One can speculate that approval ratings and trust were highest for Tsvangirai in May 2009 due to euphoria surrounding the formation of the GNU after almost a decade of economic meltdown. While Mugabe may have been blamed for the pre-2009 economic troubles, the semblance of socio-economic stability that emerged with the GNU may have been credited in part to Tsvangirai and his party. However, it seems that subsequent surveys may reflect reality checks for the MDC-T.

Some analysts view corruption by MDC-T local councillors as having spoiled the party's march to State House. For example, in 2012, the MDC-T fired some councillors in Harare, Chitungwiza, Gweru, Kwekwe, and Zvishavane for allegedly engaging in corrupt activities. This may have led voters to doubt the party's ability to run the country any differently than the ZANU-PF. Others contend that the ZANU-PF's populist policies, such as the indigenisation of foreign-owned companies, won public sympathy while the MDC-T's opposition to this policy was painted as evidence that the party was against black empowerment.

The remarkable improvement of the Zimbabwean economy since 2009 also proved to be a double-edged sword for the MDC-T. The party has argued that with the Finance and Industry ministries in the hands of the MDC-T and the MDC-Mutambara (MDC-M), respectively, they successfully transformed the economy from an inflationary nightmare to one that has recorded consistent growth. However, restoring the economic fortunes of the country has meant that there are fewer food shortages and inflationary problems to talk about, and the message of needing to mend Zimbabwe's economy now has a smaller audience. The ZANU-PF's control of the media during the GNU era may also have allowed it to spruce up its image.

Predictors of voting intentions

Regarding factors that determine voting decisions, the literature suggests that a voter may choose a candidate on the basis of specific issues of public policy, general evaluations of leaders' performance, and personal characteristics of the candidates. Social factors such as the voters' age, religion, region, and social class can also influence voting intentions. To examine the extent to which fear of political violence and other factors may influence voting in Zimbabwe, a logistic regression model was developed. Variables tracked over the review period are: trust in and perceived performance of Mugabe and Tsvangirai, fear of political intimidation or violence, and

management of the economy. The model is captured in Table 1. The dependent variable is the intention to vote for the ZANU-PF.

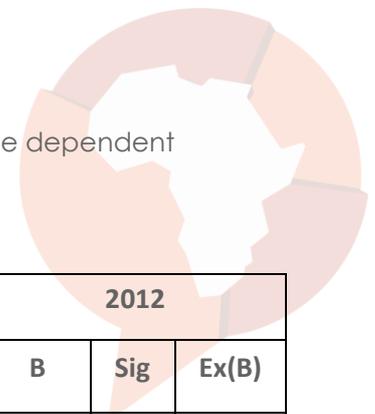


Table 1: Predictors of the intention to vote for the ZANU-PF

Independent variable	2009			2010			2012		
	B	Sig	Ex(B)	B	Sig	Ex(B)	B	Sig	Ex(B)
Trust in president	1.925	.000	6.853	2.102	.000	8.816	3.071	.000	21.563
Trust in prime minister	-1.637	.017	.195	-2.070	.015	.126	-3.129	.000	.044
Performance of president	2.746	.000	15.585	3.272	.000	26.362	3.721	.000	41.290
Performance of prime minister	-.041	.936	.959	-2.506	.000	.082	-1.815	.000	.163
Fear of political violence	-1.216	.020	.296	.941	.002	2.561	-1.169	.000	.311
Management of the economy	-.800	.042	.450	.925	.003	2.521	.236	.000	1.266
Constant	.257	.217	1.293	-1.382	.076	.251	-.236	.563	.790

As indicated in Table 1, the perceived performance of the president was a crucial predictor of voting intentions; naturally, the higher one rated the president's performance, the more likely one was to vote for the ZANU-PF. The president's perceived performance was a strong predictor in all three survey rounds but had its strongest impact in 2012. Similarly, trust in the president was a key predictor of the intention to vote for the ZANU-PF across all three survey rounds, with the strongest impact in 2012. This helps explain why the ZANU-PF candidate managed to retain power with a larger margin than in previous elections. Not only were Mugabe's performance evaluations and trust levels improving, but these very issues were also, over time, becoming increasingly likely to translate into support for the ZANU-PF.

Trust in the prime minister was also an important predictor in the 2012 survey; naturally, the higher the trust in the prime minister, the less likely the respondent was to vote for the ZANU-PF. Perceived performance of the prime minister seems to have had a major impact in 2010 but was weakening by 2012.

Regarding the role of political intimidation and violence, the more a respondent expressed fear, the less likely s/he was in 2009 to express an intention to vote for the ZANU-PF. The opposite was true in 2010. The situation changed again in 2012, when those who were fearful of violence were more likely to vote for the MDC-T than for the ZANU-PF. Overall, fear is a significant factor, but less important than other factors, in predicting voting intentions. Interestingly, positive evaluations of government management of the economy in the 2010 and 2012 surveys translate into intended ZANU-PF votes, supporting the inference that the GNU was seen as dominated by the ZANU-PF.

Conclusion

This study highlights some important factors related to the MDC-T's declining political fortunes in Zimbabwe. One key issue arising is the need for a rethink within the political opposition and civil society regarding the perception that the MDC-T's recent electoral defeat was wholly due to electoral manipulation, fraud, intimidation, and violence. While electoral fear matters, much of the MDC-T's defeat had to do with changing evaluations of, and trust in, government leadership: a slight decline for then-Prime Minister Tsvangirai and a massive gain for President Mugabe. The irony here may be that while it was the actions of the MDC-T in the GNU that helped stabilize the country, it was Mugabe and the ZANU-PF that benefited electorally from this arrangement. It would be interesting for future studies to explore how perceptions of corruption and control of the media shape voting intentions and affect support for the MDC-T.



To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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