

# Why the voters will continue to opt for Mugabe's cloud-cuckoo land

By RICH MKHONDO

Zimbabwe's neighbours and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) may as well prepare to applaud another "victory" by Robert Gabriel Mugabe and Zanu-PF in the March 29 election.

After all, their ageing comrade, a wily old fox, a tyrant who has run out of workable ideas for improving the lot of his people, has used every trick in the megalomaniac's manual to stay in power.

In a free and fair society, who would re-elect a president who has presided over the fastest-shrinking economy in the world, a country with rising food shortages, where at least 4 million people are facing starvation and 3 million – one-fifth of his nation – have fled abroad; where nine in 10 of those who remain live on less than R7 a day and unemployment runs at 80%?

Despite his horrific record, president Mugabe still wears a cloak of

legitimacy and, believe it or not, Zimbabweans are going to re-elect him and his corrupt Zanu-PF. Here is why and how.

The people of Zimbabwe need a change in leadership.

But given their bitter historical experience fighting the white minority government of Ian Smith and its supporters in the West, Zimbabweans are not that desperate to hand over the country and the reins of the state to Morgan Tsvangirai, president of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC); to Arthur Mutumbaru, president of the other MDC; or to Simba Makoni, the independent presidential candidate.

Mugabe will win the votes that count, those of the majority rural Zimbabweans, who make up 75% of the population.

The president is and has been using the land-reform agenda, however faint his resolve to pursue it to its logical and equitable conclusion,

to rally supporters.

In the critical domain of partisan electioneering a la president Mugabe, grassroots mobilisation in the rural and poverty stricken areas and organisation is where elections are won and lost.

Because of their liberation struggle legacy, Mugabe and his party succeeded in establishing a philosophical and ideological kinship with the majority of Zimbabweans by using land reform as a campaign slogan.

They have often used hunger as a political weapon, directing aid to the party's rank and file, while withholding it from those who support the beleaguered opposition.

Why is everyone surprised that Mugabe has signed into law a bill giving Zimbabwean businessmen the right to take majority control of all foreign companies, including mines and banks?

Indeed, why are we surprised that he has signed the "Indigenisa-

tion and Economic Empowerment Bill", paving the way for the indigenisation of Zimbabwe's economy and the economic empowerment of the country's indigenous citizens?

Also, thanks to gerrymandering, Mugabe has the power and authority to name one-fifth of MPs. From vote one, opposition parties are minus 30 MPs.

The three opposition leaders should concede that theirs is not a true participatory democracy. Their constituency of narrow, group-based, unionised fringe advocacy and disaffected "Mugabe-ites" are hardly adequate vote-winners.

Many, perhaps millions of would-be MDC voters have gone abroad in search of jobs, food or freedom. They will not be allowed to vote unless they work for the government.

Those who remain, often the old and the very young, are easier to intimidate or bribe with hand-outs of mealie meal and the promise of

free land and farms.

Mugabe and his party control every facet of the election process. For example, vote counting will be administered by the army. Ballot boxes are made of transparent plastic.

Counting will be done during the night and by candle- or torchlight. The soldiers, who are fed and paid by the government, will guard and transport the ballot boxes.

How about the fact that at least 800 000 dead people are known to be on the electoral register?

But opposition candidates have not been allowed to scrutinise the roll.

My friends in Zimbabwe tell me that villagers have been told a "central computer" will be able to identify which village voted for who – a clear and cynical threat aimed at people on the edge of famine.

State-run media are working at full-tilt to maintain the old man's fairytale, cloud-cuckoo-land. The

ruling party controls all broadcast media, and critical print journalism is all but banned. Zimbabwean journalists writing for foreign media were and are being hounded out of the country.

The people are starved of information. Living in the old Soviet Union. All information is government-controlled.

Two of Mugabe's legal fictions – the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, to deal with the press, and the Public Order and Security Act, to deal with opposition parties, are reminiscent of Stalin in the 1930s.

They give the president the right to arrest, imprison, torture, suppress and – that staple of Marxists everywhere – invent anything that he needs.

Election observers from countries that harp on about democracy, such as Britain and America, are banned. Few Zimbabweans will be

allowed to monitor the polls, either. Responsibility for organising the election rests with a commission whose members Mugabe appoints.

Devoid of a strategy to arrest Zimbabwe's catastrophic collapse, Mugabe has resorted to the classic tactics adopted by dictators through the decades – inventing, and then demonising, local and international enemies to divert attention from his own failings.

He has the ability to invent conspiracies involving the MDC, Western governments and any other opponents.

So, come April, we will once again welcome the continued reign of His Excellency, Comrade Robert Gabriel Mugabe, President of the Republic of Zimbabwe for Life.

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# A classic tragedy unfolds in Zimbabwe

President Robert Mugabe has learnt the lessons of history – so his country is doomed to repeat it, writes Derek Catsam

Simba Makoni is running an inspired but quixotic campaign against Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. Some believe that Makoni's surprising challenge might represent the last, best chance to unseat the wily despot north of the Limpopo.

But, the reality is that the election planned for March 29 has all of the makings of a classic tragedy in which we can see the fates of the protagonists even as they unfold while being incapable of doing anything about it.

And let there be no mistake: by hook or by crook (in every meaning of that word), Mugabe will win, or at least will "win", this election. For years, he has cowed opposition, bribed his country's elites and like any Big Man has made as many people as possible dependent on him.

Although there have been some rumblings of discontent within the police, it is clear that Mugabe has maintained enough control over the police and the military to ensure that if necessity demands, the election will be taken by the men with the guns. But the people of Zimbabwe are so cowed that violence will likely be relatively mild and largely unnecessary, though it will be there as a lingering threat – a reminder of what Mugabe can do. Simple thievery and corruption and the presence of Mugabe's henchmen will be enough.

No, Makoni will not win the election. In fact, he may find his future prospects seriously curtailed after next Saturday's election is over and Mugabe's inevitable re-election announced. And many of the reasons why are rooted in history.

This election fight shares eerie parallels with another campaign in which someone broke from the fold to challenge what was at the time Mugabe's encroaching dictatorship.

Edgar Tekere was a liberation hero and one-time close friend of Mugabe who had left the government of his own volition in 1981. In April 1989, Tekere decided that he had seen enough of rampant government corruption, the privilege accorded a select few of Mugabe's sycophants and supporters, the increasingly one-party nature of the state, Mugabe's designs on a presidency for life and the concomitant dictatorship that was emerging.

He thus formed the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM), which instantly drew the support of masses of disaffected urbanites, university students and many whites.

ZUM's first foray into electoral politics gave indications of things to come. Tekere entered into parliamentary by-elections in a suburb of Harare. His campaign slogan, "murambatsvina" – then represented as meaning "we don't like dirt" – would, ironically, be used in a more sinister fashion when Mugabe forced the removal of hundreds of thousands in Harare under "Operation Murambatsvina", whose Shona meaning was usually given as "Drive out the rubbish", in 2005.

ZUM was harassed, its spokesmen silenced, the state media ignored it and yet ZUM still gained 30% of the votes, which merely raised the ire and suspicion of Mugabe and thus roused him to the sort of action that would characterise the coming two decades: crushing the opposition.

University students were at the forefront of this newly organised anti-Mugabe force, and the police brutalised students. They also beat and detained labour leaders, including the secretary-general of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, a man by the name of Morgan



RAY OF HOPE: Simba Makoni, one of the presidential opposition candidates, dances for the crowd at a rally in Masvingo, Zimbabwe ahead of the elections on March 29. Makoni's challenge represents the last, best chance at unseating President Robert Mugabe

Picture: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tsvangirai, who found himself detained repeatedly. Tsvangirai would, of course, go on to lead the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and he would be the most visible challenger to Mugabe until Makoni's candidacy.

The 1990 countrywide elections saw more of the same. Mugabe used the twin pillars of violence and the powers of the incumbency, both coercive and financial, to buttress his *de facto* one-party state. He used carrots and where carrots proved

insufficient he used sticks.

Again Tekere mounted a challenge, but to no avail. It did not help that Tekere lacked many of the personal characteristics that Makoni possesses today; Tekere was believed to be an alcoholic with a volcanic

temper and he surrounded himself with a number of his own thugs and other unsavoury characters.

But, the most significant factor in the 1990 elections was that state violence and coercion continued unabated and Mugabe

consolidated his rule.

In successive elections, Mugabe continued to smash and beleague the opposition while enticing and rewarding his supporters. He stole, whitewashed, threatened and generally made a mockery of elections.

The chicanery of Zimbabwean electoral politics has now reached a point where just the threat of violence is enough to dissuade most of the country's citizens from opposing Mugabe. And the lack of violence will enable Mugabe's largely hand-picked election monitors (he has made clear that Western observers will by and large be unwelcome) to claim after the election that despite relatively minor irregularities, the election went reasonably smoothly.

The parallels between Makoni's candidacy today and Tekere's 20 years ago are more than suggestive. Sadly, in the end, the other most crucial similarity will be that Mugabe and his Zanu-PF will continue to hold the country in a death grip. The *de facto* one-party state that Makoni and Tekere and so many others over the decades have lamented will prevail.

Mugabe's presidency for life will mean that hopelessness for Zimbabweans not under Mugabe's protective penumbra, which provides shade to fewer and fewer Zimbabweans, will continue unabated. History is about change over time, but in this case, what remains the same will loom far larger than what has changed. Mugabe has learned from history. Thus Zimbabwe is doomed to repeat it.

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As it is the Easter long weekend, I am writing this column four days advance, but I can confidently predict at least one news item that will appear in newspapers and on radio and TV when it's all over – the Easter road death toll.

We'll either be celebrating because it's lower than last year, or beating our collective chests because it's higher. Whichever it is, there will have been far too many deaths.

If you're reading this it means you escaped, and I am happy for you. It's the traditional way we South Africans celebrate – we get out there and kill each other. This always seems to me to be a strange way of spending our holidays.

But then I think back to the old days on the farm when our labourers used to spend their weekends getting drunk and stabbing each other. My father used to shrug and say he couldn't understand it, but it seemed to be their way of relaxing.

It's only since the staff joined a very charismatic church that the weekend stabbings have stopped. Now they sing instead of stabbing, and that's a huge improvement.

But among motorists the long weekend killings just go on as enthusiastically as ever. Maybe we should learn to sing.

Why does everybody want to be somewhere else over holidays? Do we not enjoy our homes?

Modern life usually means family members spend far too little quality time together. We rush off to work or school early in the mornings and get home late in the evenings, too tired to be nice to each other, or too burdened with



## DAVID BIGGS Tavern of the Seas

homework to sit and chat about the day's happenings.

Most of us have just enough energy left at the end of each day to slump down and watch mindless soaps on TV.

Maybe we need to rethink the way we spend these public holidays.

Wouldn't it be good to get together as a family at home – have a few friends round for a braai, go for a walk together, play some beach soccer or dust off the old Monopoly board and gather round the dining table for a game.

Maybe we could spend a weekend on a family project, like building a pergola in the garden together, or if the weather's a bit rough, sorting through all those drawers of old family photographs and sticking them into albums before we forget who that fat chap in the apron was.

In fact, anything rather than

pling into the car and setting off along Hell's Highway to see how many of us can survive the slaughter.

Anyway, no matter how you chose to spend your long weekend, I hope the Easter Bunny was kind to you and that you are now safely back home.

### Priced for home

Come to think of it, maybe the high petrol price will have kept some people at home over Easter.

I doubt it, though. Beer and fizzy cooldrink still costs a lot more than petrol and that doesn't seem to have forced anybody to switch to drinking water.

### Last laugh

The battered old sports has-been was nursing his seventh beer in the pub.

He turned to the chap sitting next to him and said: "When I played university rugby, I was almost single-handedly responsible for the Maties beating the Ikeys for three years in a row."

"Really!" said his companion politely. "And which team were you playing for?"

*The Wanderer*

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# The unbearable lightness of being stupid

Self-confessed stupid woman Chloe Cartwright realises that the bog of ignorant bliss is more comforting than reality



CHLOE CARTWRIGHT

Philippe is a moron. My aunt Maude, who spends her days sipping pureed spinach through a straw, is an idiot. George Bush is an imbecile and Manto is a moron. How do I know? Because I clawed my way out of the bog of ignorant bliss – and, sadly, discovered there are times when I can be stupid too.

My path of learning began when Philippe and I were standing in DVD Nouveau, arguing over which movie to hire. I wanted to mire myself in Keanu Reeves, while the gay lord was getting his tangas in a twist over some turgid epic involving carriages and dukes in nut-splicing jodhpurs.

Philippe, with his eye on the long-haired cinema *smous* behind the counter, insisted on making a scene, hitting me with his new moon bag. "Keanu is a coffee table," he snapped. "If he were more wooden he would be the lump of beer-soaked ash at the end of a braai. At least this one has real sex," he said, clutching his *moffie* melodrama as he minced towards the counter.

I did what most manipulating fag hags would do, and burst into tears, burbling that I just wanted to watch something nice, that this was no way to treat a best friend, and that I would sew pickled fish into his curtains.

Easter requiem, ended up giving himself a pedicure while reading the latest Clicks Club magazine.

Amid images of Bush and jacked-up juveniles doing *Jackass* things, the film interviews people like Noam (who is not hot, not even in an old-Clint-Eastwood way) and argues that people are consciously stupid, resisting intelligence and preferring the non-threatening mush of the Bog of Bliss. It also describes how the IQ rating was developed, and how people were assessed according to legitimate categories, including those of idiot, imbecile and moron.

According to the film, babies can be classified as idiots, and when I heard this I slapped my thigh and punched the air. "See, Philippe," I cackled over my 19th schnapps, "all this time I've been arguing with the Nazis at Cavendish about the unfairness of babies and mothers having designated parking, and I'm right! Babies are idiots! They're lower down the IQ ranking than me, so why should they get preferential treatment?"

Philippe looked up from painting his nails and paused for thought. Ten minutes later, after the clattering of his brain cogs had subsided, he said, "If babies are idiots, then you were one once too."

I pulled a face at him and continued watching. Morons were the most intriguing bunch, showing a potential for normal functioning but not quite getting there.

"I knew it!" I spat, spilling peach schnapps all over my pashmina.

"Sam is a moron! He thinks Turkey is in Europe, he puts his underpants on back-to-front and he believes in the healing power of squirrels. He's a moron!"

Philippe's brain-chugging began again, drowning out the film's soundtrack. After 15 minutes, and with nail file held aloft, he said pointedly, "Sam might be a moron, but who was the idiot who married him? And if clumsiness is an imbecilic trait, may I point out that your pashmina currently resembles a Kauai smoothie. And Turkey is in Europe."

The following day I headed to Greenmarket Square and picked up two T-shirts, both emblazoned with the words "I'm with stupid", one with an arrow pointing out of the shirt, the other with an arrow pointing towards the crotch area. Philippe and I could wear them to our poker evening the next night.

"You should give these away to everyone," I sighed to the saleswoman, waving my hand at the smoking, drinking, buying, driving, eating, hollering masses.

With our wars, our violence, our consumerism – our inability to choose an intelligent path – humans are intrinsically stupid. Just some, particularly squirrel worshippers and men with Violet Intrigue toenails, are afflicted more than others.

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