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Zimbabwe on the Brink of a Revolution

By Itayi Garande

Harare — Doctors have been on strike for weeks, teachers are boycotting classes and now civil servants are threatening to stay away from their offices in another sign of the general collapse of the Zimbabwean state.

President Robert Mugabe, in power since independence in 1980, has found his position largely unchallenged in recent times given splits in opposition ranks.

But analysts believe the recent wave of industrial unrest, with workers desperate for pay hikes to keep up pace with the skyrocketing cost of living, could soon boil over and culminate in spontaneous anti-government protests.

Mugabe may have dismissed his trade unionist opponents as being "deranged" but Raymond Majongwe, the labour leader who instigated this week's strike action by thousands of teachers, is not backing off.

"They can arrest us but we will not move an inch from our demands. It's us who call the shots," said Majongwe, of the Progressive Teachers' Union.

The union wants teachers' monthly salaries raised from the current average of Zim\$100 000 (US\$400 at the official rate but less than US\$25 on the black market) to Zim\$540 000, describing its demands the "bare minimum considering the current cost of living".

Civil servants rise up

Hospitals have largely ceased to operate since senior doctors joined long-striking junior medics in staying away at the beginning of January.

They had also asked for a tenfold increase in salaries to keep up with the surging cost of living which is being fuelled by inflation which now stands at 1 281%—the highest in the world.

Emergency cases are being handled by army medics and a few senior doctors who have decided to keep turning up at their workplace.

Similar protests can be heard from the civil servants' Public Service Association union which has hinted at a strike by calling on members "to plan the way forward in the event that we do not get the relief we are seeking".

The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, long a thorn in the flesh of Mugabe, has given the government until February 23 to reduce income tax, increase access to anti-Aids drugs and pay salaries above the poverty threshold.

Mugabe's 'invisible opposition'

University of Zimbabwe political science professor Eldred Masunungure said the economy was becoming "the invisible opposition" to Mugabe's rule.

"It's driving the current spate of strikes in the absence of real political opposition," Masunungure said.

"Although there is no coherence in the protests they could degenerate to political protests."

Economic analyst Elizabeth Marunda warned of spontaneous rioting similar to food riots in the 1990s led by the then ZCTU and current opposition chief Morgan Tsvangirai.

"Revolutions have come about as a result of discontent and we have a lot of discontent in the country today,"

Marunda said.

Mugabe's unease

"The problem is whenever people express their anger through protests they are brutally crushed. There will be danger when the people's anger meets eye to eye with the state machinery."

In a sign of his unease, Mugabe on Wednesday sacked finance minister Herbert Murerwa for failing to get a grip on inflation.

During the swearing-in ceremony for his successor Samuel Mumbengegwi, Mugabe said he would "never allow" street protests to take place and called his union critics the "deranged ones".

Once a regional model, Zimbabwe's economy has been on the slide for nearly eight years. Previously unheard of food shortages are now widespread with at least 80% of the population living below the poverty line.

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