

Address by Zwelinzima Vavi, COSATU General Secretary, to the preparatory meeting for the trade union and civil society international solidarity conference, 15 July 2008

Free elections and democracy in Zimbabwe and Swaziland Now!

“International solidarity is the lifeblood of trade unionism” says one of COSATU’s core principles. And that principle has guided the federation’s approach to the situation in Zimbabwe and Swaziland.

Both countries pose a massive challenge to the people of Africa. Recent developments threaten to roll back the spreading trend towards democracy in Africa. That is why this solidarity conference is so important. It is an opportunity for the workers of Africa to lead a campaign of the people of Africa to demand the establishment of democracy and respect for human rights in two countries where these concepts have been trampled upon in the past period.

2008 is a year of elections in both countries, but in neither case does the process resemble any accepted standards of democracy.

In recent weeks the crisis in Zimbabwe has scaled new heights. The elections held on 29 March 2008 seem with hindsight to have been relatively free and fair, but let us not forget that throughout the period preceding them, it was normal practice for police to raid the offices of the ZCTU and of other political activists, particularly of MDC, harassing, threatening and beating staff, searching offices and seizing fliers, files and videotapes. They routinely arrested union activists campaigning in support of democracy and social justice in the country.

The state did everything possible to crush the resistance of opposition parties, civil society organisations and the trade unions and ruthlessly trampled on human rights.

Yet despite all this, the results showed a victory in the Parliamentary vote for the opposition parties and even in the Presidential, despite desperate attempts to delay the announcement of the result, the government could not hide the fact that the incumbent president had been defeated, though not quite by a sufficiently decisive margin.

Hence the need for a run-off presidential ‘election’ which as we now know, rapidly degenerated into a bloody farce, in which we witnessed:

- Widespread political violence in which dozens of people were murdered;
- Thousands of people threatened with death, beaten, tortured and harassed for expressing or supporting the opposition;
- People forced to attend political rallies, failing which they were being beaten up;

- The usual polling officers, i.e. teachers and civil servants, sidelined in the running of elections in favour of ruling party supporters;
- Thousands of people displaced through political violence and thereby unable to vote;
- The President making it clear that he would not accept defeat even if he lost the election.
- Very few local observers accredited to oversee the conduct of the elections;
- Continuous harassment of workers on their way to and from work by youths and militias deployed in suburbs;
- Opposition party agents harassed, some killed and therefore unable to monitor what happened on the day of the election;
- The opposition refused permission to campaign;
- A complete black out of the opposition in the public media and when it was mentioned, always in a negative light;
- Potential voters were threatened that their names would be recorded if they voted for the opposition.

The MDC, quite understandably in these circumstances, refused to legitimise the sham and withdrew from the 'election' which clearly breached the SADC protocols governing the conduct of elections. The observer teams of the AU, SADC and the African Parliament indeed confirmed that the elections were not free and fair.

COSATU has therefore demanded that the leaders of the SADC and AU governments to withdraw their recognition of a 'government' that has no mandate to rule following their defeat on 29 March 2008, but is clinging to power by brute force.

COSATU has already:

- 1) Mobilised a blockade to protest against the violence Mugabe has unleashed against his own people.
- 2) Called on all COSATU's other Provinces, and civil society organisations, including those armchair critics of COSATU's commitment to human rights, to organise rallies during July, and to call on the ANC and SACP to take similar action in solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe
- 3) Called on the workers in South Africa, SADC, Africa and the world over, as well as all progressive citizens of the world, to work towards a total isolation of Mugabe and his government. We call on all our unions and those everywhere else in the world to make sure that they never ever serve Mugabe anywhere, including at airports, restaurants, shops, etc. Further we call on all workers and citizens of the world never to allow Mugabe to set foot in their countries.

4) Called on the South African government, SADC governments, African governments and all other governments not to recognise Mugabe's illegal government all over the world, and to refuse to have any dealings with Mugabe other than ensuring that he work towards a new elections strictly under the conditions of total observance of the SADC election protocols.

5) Called on all the governments and employers to support the application that has been submitted by labour under Article 26 of the ILO Constitution against the Zimbabwe government for non-observance of the ILO's Convention 87 (Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise) and Convention 98 (Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining) respectively.

Meanwhile the economy of Zimbabwe has collapsed. Annual inflation is now around the ludicrous level of 355 000% - the highest in the world. Unemployment is around 80%. Many people survive on grain handouts and around 28% of the population, many of them highly skilled, have fled into neighbouring countries looking for work.

There are regular shortages of food, fuel and foreign exchange. Maize production has dropped to less than half the amount people need to survive. The government cannot afford to maintain roads and railways.

Average life expectancy is now the lowest in the world - less than 37. The country is among the worst hit by Africa's HIV/Aids pandemic, with 18% of the adult population HIV positive.

The underlying social problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality have their roots in IMF and World Bank-inspired economic structural adjustment programmes (ESAPs), which left the government without a coherent economic strategy. To this were added the unfair terms of trade, which hit all developing countries.

The ZANU-PF government began to move away from redistributive economic policies towards measures to attract foreign investment. Investment in health, education and other social services was cut. Privatisation and public service downsizing led to retrenchments.

The government also failed to address the land question, which had always been at the core of the liberation struggle. The land was largely in the hands of whites, but for 20 years the government did nothing.

Then, to deflect attention from its growing economic problems, it suddenly launched its chaotic land grab campaign, to mask its previous failures and to shift focus from other government failures.

It flagrantly disregarded the law and unleashed a wave of violence by pro-ZANU-PF hooligans, much of it directed at farm workers. It was also a well-timed electoral gimmick by a leadership that had run out of ideas. It became a policy that discredited the whole land redistribution process.

Meanwhile the government became increasingly heavy-handed, intolerant of dissent and political plurality, expressed in the tendency to label anyone one who criticises government as an enemy of the revolution. The government ruthlessly repressed the trade union movement - the mainstay of the forces calling for change.

Meetings and demonstrations were banned, leaders arrested and beaten, while the government tried to infiltrate their stooges. Yet it nevertheless has stood firm against the most intolerable attacks.

If transformation does not change the material conditions of the formerly oppressed - replacing white with black rulers - then it is a cosmetic change. Failure to resolve the pressing issues of the society leads to disillusionment, disenchantment and a lack of interest in the transformation project. The government for a long time failed to address critical issues facing the masses. But, in Orwellian fashion, turns up the revolutionary rhetoric to try to whip up support. It embraces neo-liberalism one moment, only to discard it towards elections, and then immediately after the elections readopts IMF-World Bank-type ESAPs.

The bureaucratisation of democratic movements is not inevitable but to keep the democratic movement vibrant and democratic it must retain its link with the people. There are no quick-fix solutions for Zimbabwe's economic, political and social woes, but the key to any solution has to be the broadest possible mass movement, led by the organised working class, in support of democracy and human rights.

While the elections held on 29 March 2008 were less than fully democratic, they were relatively free and fair and produced a partially accurate reflection of the will of the people. COSATU therefore supports the proposals for SADC and the AU to sponsor a transitional administration, in which all the contending political parties will be represented, in proportion to the votes cast on 29 March.

The sole mandate of this transitional administration has to be organising free and fair elections as soon as possible, monitored by an increased number of domestic and African observers, so that democracy can be restored, human rights protected and the will of the people reigns supreme.

Why Swaziland has escaped the international human rights radar for so long?

Swaziland got its independence from Britain in 1968 under King Sobhuza. However, this was merely a transfer of power from the British colonial masters to a neo-colonial monarchy, through which the British sought to re-establish its domination and exploitation.

The nature of this monarchy was defined the King's 1973 proclamation to the nation:

"Now, therefore I, Sobhuza 11, king of Swaziland, hereby declare that, in collaboration with my cabinet ministers and supported by the whole nation, I have assumed supreme power in the kingdom of Swaziland and that all legislative, executive and judicial powers is now vested in myself and shall, for the meantime be exercised in collaboration with my cabinet ministers.

"I further declare that to ensure the continued maintenance of peace, order and good government, my armed forces have been posted to all strategic places and have taken charge of all government places and all public services. All political parties and similar bodies that

cultivate and bring about disturbances and ill-feelings within the nation are hereby dissolved and prohibited."

This decree laid the basis for the current political architecture, where politics are the exclusive preserve of the ruling royal elite. In 1978 they introduced a system of called tinkhundla, which sought to entrench the hegemony of royal supremacy and deepen the semi-feudal and neo-colonial character of Swazi society. It fragmented Swazis into competing localities called tinkhundla in the name of "unique and home-grown democracy", which is directly in conflict with the universal principles of democracy.

The world has conveniently remained silent about Swaziland and allowed the ruling royal regime to get away with murder. The world remains silent, after a regime has been allowed to enforce a state of emergency for more than 34 years, despite Amnesty International raising, on several occasions, the issue of extreme police brutality in Swaziland, in its fact-finding mission's damning report on the Swazi security forces.

Why does the Commonwealth and Britain apply double standards when it comes to Swaziland in contrast to its hysterical attacks on Mugabe? Why does it not apply smart sanctions against the stubborn regime for refusing to unban political parties and political activities in general?

Why does the Commonwealth support and heap praises on a constitution that entrenches the power of the ruling aristocracy and to affirm the state of emergency, yet unequivocally demand clear guidelines for democracy elsewhere?

Poor people are on the receiving end of the regime's viciousness, with more and more Swazis being forced to cross the borders into South Africa in search of jobs, yet the country is well endowed with abundant natural resources that have become a preserve of a tiny ruling minority.

Finally, the following conditions obtain as regards the royal 'elections':

- Political parties remain banned, with the exception of the royal broederbond, which is the only legal political force that has monopoly over the entire political life of our country as an organised force
- The new constitution of the monarchy, itself a direct off-shoot of the king's decree of 1973, bans political parties and criminalises all forms of political activity and the basic rights to associate and organise, not to mention demonstrations and marches
- Parliament is nothing but a rubber stamp and stooge of royal power. It has no power to determine anything that is not in the interest of the royal family and the monarchy, aside the fact that it is largely comprised of royalists and their apologists
- The media and judiciary are extensions and auxiliaries of the royal establishment, independence is a luxury they cannot afford.
- Political activists are regularly detained for their peaceful political activities, which are in anyway, illegal even according to the new constitution proclaimed by the king recently

There are important differences between the situations in Zimbabwe and Swaziland but the end-result is basically the same - the continued exploitation and oppression of the poor as under colonialism. The prime lessons from these three comparisons indicate the following factors:

- The political structures of these countries and their post-colonial configuration vary, but the fundamentals of parasitic accumulation and growth path remain;
- The elites that drive neo-liberalism in these countries differ in the way they developed, with some emerging from the ranks of anti-colonial struggles, whilst others were off-shoots of surrogate accommodation with colonial interests, but they all became fully integrated into the orbit of global capital accumulation and parasitism as junior partners of the powerful forces of global capital, transforming them into elites acting to protect their own interests and those of global capitalism in general.
- Britain as the former colonial power is partly responsible for the continuing crisis in these countries, cannot just play an innocent angel or honest opinion-maker on the situation in these countries. In fact, Britain, through the Commonwealth and on its own accord, plays double standards, outrightly condemning Zimbabwe, but doing all it can to protect the Swazi monarchy in Swaziland.
- The ideological arsenal of these different elites take different forms with some of them resorting to patriarchal, narrow semi-feudal values in the name of culture and tradition, whilst others resort to anti-imperialist rhetoric blended with revolutionary phrase mongering. They facilitate imperialist accumulation in general. The deployment of reactionary ideologies to demobilise society and destroy organs of social revolution and intensified patronage have characterised the essence of all their approaches.
- Finally, the ruling elites are all determined to maintain, whatever the cost in human and other terms, their power and privileges. In other words, they are prepared to go to any extent to keep themselves in power. Phony 'elections' are therefore an integral part of renewing their legitimacy and tightening their hold on the whole of society.