CHURCHES SEEK DIALOGUE AMIDST ZIMBABWE'S TURMOIL

By Doug Tilton

The cautious optimism that characterized the popular mood in Zimbabwe at the beginning of 2018 had largely dissipated by the beginning of this year. In January 2019, a huge fuel price increase triggered widespread protests that were brutally suppressed by security forces, prompting concerns that Zimbabwe is returning to the repression that marked the Mugabe era. In the midst of this turmoil, the Church is working to foster national dialogue that emphasizes the sanctity of the 2013 Constitution and unity in diversity.

The November 2017 toppling of Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's leader since independence in 1980, seemed to create new opportunities for political expression and participation, and Mugabe's successor, former Vice-President Emmerson Mnangagwa, appeared to be committed to protecting freedoms of speech and association. Early reforms, such the elimination of the requirement that all businesses in Zimbabwe must be majority owned by "indigenous" Zimbabweans, had stimulated new commercial activity. Revised land policies prompted growth in tobacco, cotton and maize output, and mineral production also increased. Utilization of productive capacity grew from a low of 34% three years earlier to approximately 60%, engendering hope for a sustained economic recovery.

Since the July 2018 General Election and its aftermath (see August 2018 newsletter), Zimbabwe has faced many more challenges. Government spending has continued to outstrip revenues, with a budget deficit of 11.6% of GDP in 2018 and an $18 billion public debt burden. The flickering signs of economic recovery spurred a demand for currency –namely, the US dollars that Zimbabwe has used since 2009—that the import dependent economy was unable to meet.

The "bond notes" issued by the Zimbabwean government, intended to be of equal value to US dollars, devalued rapidly after the election, and US notes soon disappeared from formal markets. Most people had already come to rely on "virtual" currencies—paying for goods and services with credit cards or cell phone based "wallets". Inflation began to rise by about 10% per month, reaching a reported 42% in December. This has had a number of severe consequences, most notably causing hospitals and pharmacies to run out of imported medical drugs and rendering them unable to replenish stocks. In addition, the BBC reported that people paying in virtual currencies can be charged four times US dollar denominated prices. In October, the government introduced austerity measures to reduce government debt and to stabilize the economy.

At the end of 2018, Sen. Jeff Flake, the retiring chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health Policy, held hearings on Zimbabwe. Joseph Mutizwa, chair of the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange Listed Companies Forum, cited a number of steps that the government had taken to stabilize the economy, but agreed that there was still a long way to go. At the same time, Mutizwa saw the economic sanctions imposed by the United States, Canada and the EU as inhibiting economic recovery.

Conversely, Dr. Todd Moss, Senior Fellow at the Center for Global Development, argued that very little had changed in Zimbabwe to justify relaxing US sanctions. "The government constantly complains that economic difficulties are the result of US sanctions rather than their own mismanagement and corruption," Moss observed, pointing out that US sanctions are targeted to 141 specific individuals.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Matthew Harrington agreed that there had been "some promising signs from the [new] government" but warned that "the pace and scale of reforms has been too gradual and not nearly ambitious enough." He said that the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act clearly articulated conditions for the lifting of sanctions: restoration of the rule of law, a commitment to equitable, legal and transparent land reform, and ensuring that military and national police forces are subordinate to the civilian government.

Since the beginning of 2019, social and economic conditions in Zimbabwe deteriorated further. In an effort to curtail demand for imports, government announced a 150% increase in the price of fuel to roughly $12.50 per gallon, giving Zimbabwe one of the highest fuel prices in the world. Soaring fuel costs also caused the prices of other basic commodities to skyrocket. Some businesses, including many private schools, are only accepting payment in scarce US dollars.

On January 14th, the country's major urban areas erupted in protests and Zimbabwe's main labour federation called for a national "stay-away." At least a dozen protesters were reported to have died in clashes with police, and dozens more were injured. Press reports indicated that police were conducting house-to-house searches for people believed to have been involved in the demonstrations, with up to 700 people detained and a number of women reporting rape. The internet was effectively shut down in Zimbabwe for several days in an effort to inhibit communication on social media.

Amnesty International said it had documented "a systematic pattern of human rights violations, including restrictions on public assembly, excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and internet shutdown by the security forces."

Churches have been struggling to minister to members in the midst of social and economic turmoil. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches has been calling for a national dialogue, based on the Constitution, to promote unity and build policy consensus. Speaking at a press conference last week, Rev. Dr. Kenneth Mtata, General Secretary of the ZCC, said: "One of the biggest challenges we are having right now Is the problem of a trust deficit. Even if you pour millions of dollars into Zimbabwe right now, when you don't have trust among Zimbabweans, those millions do not help you with anything. That is why we are making this incessant call that the only solution we have for Zimbabwe is dialogue."

"We must allow the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission to take a lead in this process," Dr. Mtata said, "but we are also aware that they are interested in working with churches and other bodies in Zimbabwe." He affirmed that a process was already underway, but added: "The outcomes of the dialogue should be binding."

Please continue to pray for the people of Zimbabwe and for our partner churches, the UPCSA Presbytery of Zimbabwe and the CCAP Harare Synod, in particular.

From ZZM Network News, February 2019