

Harare, 2007

The press club in downtown Harare's Ambassador Hotel is one of the only public establishments left in the capital whose patrons aren't afraid to badmouth the authorities. They gather every night, starting with a small handful on Monday that rises in number and volume as the week goes on, until Friday comes and the Quill Lounge echoes with inebriated calls for new government which none of the assembled journalists would ever be able to publish.

They don't agree on much. Beyond a common contempt for Robert Mugabe, the divisions can become so intense it feels like the third chimurenga, Zimbabwe's perennial independence struggle, is being waged between these walls. In a way, it is. Takura's tufted dreadlocks quiver as he shoves his finger into Kumbirai's pudgy face, insisting that the Movement for Democratic Change is no longer a viable Opposition; Nyika and Dydimus lean over the ragged pool table, disposed it seems to lay their steel-tipped cues into one another over the question of sanctions. Half a dozen such arguments boil, merging and rippling across the room - African politics seen through the lens of the underdogs.

President Mugabe, of course, sees the current struggle from a different perspective. He has defined the Third Chimurenga as an economic creature whose first steps were the infamous land seizures of 2000, "which we embarked on," he explained, "upon realizing that while we might be free, we cannot go forward without possessing our land." Seven years on, Mugabe's regime now also possesses an economy operating at one third of its former productivity. Zimbabwe, Africa's richest state at the end of the twentieth century, is now one of the most destitute. Four fifths of the population is unemployed, the treasury is bankrupt, not a single lending institution will extend a line of credit. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Mugabe's quest for economic freedom is the exponential rise in prices it has wrought. Though not (yet) the highest this world has ever seen, Zimbabwe's legendary hyperinflation has become the longest-running episode of its kind in history.

To Mugabe, this is war. "We see some industrialists here pushing for regime change," he announced last June, "so now we are going to make things hard for each other." Anyone wondering what he meant needed to look no further than the price freeze imposed on basic commodities a few days before his speech. "Whether you are bakers, producers of cement, or you are in construction," Mugabe now warned, "take note. We are coming after you."

Take note they did. Forced to choose between selling their products at a loss or not at all, shop owners made the only possible decision. They took what little remained of the formal economy underground. Everything from bread to sugar and gasoline flowed out of stores and onto the streets, where prices rose even faster than before. Officially, inflation leapt from 4500% in May to nearly 8000% in three months; that would have

been bad enough if it were true, but the reality was closer to 50,000%, and predicted by the IMF to reach 150,000% by year's end.

Watching from Nairobi, where I lived at the time, a curious picture emerged. Mugabe's belligerence, the rising tide of paranoia and repression, the racist arguments flowing from both sides of the debate, these were plain for all to see. But somewhere behind closed doors, beyond the stock images of empty shelves and border crossings, Zimbabwe's economy was reinventing itself on the run, becoming one enormous black market. What did that look like? At the end of October, I bought a ticket to Harare and went shopping.