

**Speech by Roy Bennett,
Treasurer General of the Movement for Democratic Change,
to the Foreign Correspondents' Association**

Johannesburg, 10 December 2010

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you tonight. It's always a privilege to meet again with those I know and to have the opportunity to develop new relationships and better understandings.

Zimbabweans are again at a crossroads. We are again faced with failure and opportunity, fear and promise. Let me explain, using my own personal situation as an illustration, a set of circumstances mirrored in the lives of millions of my countrymen. I am again in exile, driven from my home by a malevolent and vengeful regime. Zanu remains determined to deny us our most basic human right—the right to live peaceful and productive lives among our own people. Increasing harassment of me was a clear precursor to further imprisonment and fabrications. I was left with little choice but to take my leave for a second time. I am better off than my many brothers and sisters in South Africa, most of whom live in

dire poverty and despair. But, like them, I am tired, homesick and heartsore.

My experience is symbolic of the political malaise that continues to grip Zimbabwe. Indeed, the painful trials and tribulations I have undergone in the last 18 months go beyond mere symbolism and are a direct result of the ugly reality that holds sway in Zimbabwe. The leadership of the Movement for Democratic Change entered the so-called inclusive government under pressure—and yet also with the utterly desperate cries of ordinary Zimbabweans ringing in our ears. Zanu’s deliberate abuse of the economy for its own enrichment had reduced the people to rags. Cholera was running rampant, schools had collapsed. We wanted to put SADC to the test, to see if they would back their own guarantees around a new constitution and free and fair elections. The alternative was a brutal, no-holds-barred showdown with the forces of repression.

Let me expand a bit. Much has been written about the MDC being ‘naïve’, being ‘hoodwinked by Mugabe’ and so on. I returned from exile in February 2009 to participate in a critical party meeting that would decide whether or not we would participate in government. I arrived at Harare airport, unsure whether I was to be arrested and jailed again. Zimbabwe had already effectively closed down. All

its vital economic organs were beyond critical. There was no fuel, no food, people were starving and the currency was worthless. We felt that Zimbabwe's immediate future might resemble Somalia. Our party put the people's interest first. Observers should acknowledge the proper motives of the MDC leadership, even if they take issue with us on tactical grounds. Robust debate took place behind closed doors, but the final decision was that we should try to implement the Global Political Agreement for the good of the people. If our leadership had rejected this proposal, Harare would quite conceivably have gone up in smoke. Do not underestimate the anger of people on the street, people whose support for MDC in successive elections had been simply ignored. We strove mightily to avoid a Kenyan conflagration.

It came as little surprise that Zanu had few intentions of meeting its obligations under the GPA. For me it was the beginning of a roller-coaster ride. I had received an exhilarating welcome by the people in Harare, carried shoulder high to party headquarters at Harvest House. But, as you know, I was soon arrested at Charles Prince airport—at the very moment my colleagues were being sworn in. Mugabe could not bear the prospect of shaking my hand. That was no loss to me. The idea of holding hands with a mass-murderer leaves me cold. I spent 40 days in the unspeakable squalor and filth

of Mutare Remand Prison. During this period, six inmates died of malnutrition. I was surrounded by walking corpses, surreal apparitions of skin and bone, men whose bodies barely clung to their souls. If a government is to be judged by the way it treats its most helpless and vulnerable, then truly Zanu is but a half step from the infamy of Nazism. The conditions in Zimbabwe's jails were little different to what I imagine they were at Auschwitz. The Commissioner of Prisons, Paradzai Zimondi, is criminally indifferent to the lives of the thousands who have perished needlessly—and he must surely account for this one day.

Demonstrations of the regime's arrogance multiplied in short order. The junta's humiliation and intimidation of the country's elected representatives was commonplace from the outset. Some of these incidents were public, but many were private and unpublicised. Nelson Chamisa was physically shirt-fronted by Constantine Chiwenga in a cowardly display of bullying. My wife and I were threatened with death by drunken militia who had been instructed to set up a roadblock for us. The shenanigans surrounding my show trial and the framing of numerous MDC Members of Parliament were a further demonstration of Zanu's duplicity.

As a Christian who has experienced the goodness and love of Jesus Christ, it is clear to me that Zanu is an anti-Christ. Zanu has turned on its head all that is good and right. Where there is plenty, it brings hunger. Where there was joy, it brings tears. Where there is hope, it brings despair. Where we would build, it destroys. Where we would save life, it kills. Where there is peace, it wages war. Where there is truth, it spews lies.

Just this week Robert Mugabe had the gall to tell President Zuma (and I quote): ‘I am a lawyer and I am not happy to be in a thing which is semi-legal’. Apparently, semi-legalities bother him, but not blatant illegalities. Let us never forget that the MDC is the only legitimate party of government post-2008. We won that election outright. Zanu lost. But aided and abetted by Thabo Mbeki, Mugabe bludgeoned his way to the negotiating table, treading on the broken lives and limbs of Zimbabweans to secure a place in the current dispensation. The liberation mantras and haughty claims to authenticity and legitimacy which litter Zanu rhetoric are just that—rubbish, refuse, a stench in the nostrils of the Zimbabwean people. So too are the oft-repeated allegations by Zanu and its supporters that MDC is a front for ‘The West’. We expect that from Zanu, but to those in SADC who take this line we say: who are you to second-guess the democratic will of the people of

Zimbabwe? Why should the votes of millions count for nothing? Who are you to suggest that Zimbabweans are too stupid and too ignorant to choose for themselves? A case of reverse neo-colonialism if ever there has been! We are tired of the insults and insinuations. We make no apologies and will not tip-toe around the region. What is said privately about crazy old men must be spelt out directly. Mugabe and his military junta must be told their game is up. The situation in the Ivory Coast has shown again the absurdity of rewarding the losers—though a different approach might do that other loser, Thabo Mbeki, out of a job. He seems to have carved out a niche as an advocate for failed dictators.

What is the road ahead in Zimbabwe? Mired in a dysfunctional constitutional process, caught in an economic holding-pattern and held to ransom by Zanu's coterie of gangsters—comically known as the Joint Operations Command—the GPA is hardly a blueprint for recovery and national healing. It was always meant to be a temporary measure—and its trajectory has underlined the need to move beyond it as a matter of urgency. What good has come out of it is almost exclusively the work of the MDC. Dollarisation and the efforts of the party through the Finance Ministry have made life more bearable for Zimbabweans. But the people must finish the job. We must stand up and show Zanu the door. We must re-group

and move forward together. It is time for all Zimbabweans to unite, to focus on the goal and the obstacle, Zanu-PF! Civil society must retain its independence but must accept the leadership of the MDC during this phase of the struggle. For its part, the MDC must see civil society as a strategic partner and recognize that there are multiple centres of resistance. I hope to play a role in building these bridges. The lessons of South Africa's United Democratic Front are there for all to see.

From SADC, and from South Africa in particular, we ask for nothing more than a level playing field. Genuinely free and fair elections are enough for us. And the major part of that is an election campaign and aftermath that is free of violence and intimidation. It is not enough to have a quiet day of voting after the people have been battered in the preceding three months—and are to be battered again after polling. For South Africa, surely it is time to see that a stable, prosperous and democratic Zimbabwe is in its interests? During the Mbeki era, we came to expect pseudo-intellectual hubris as a substitute for the pragmatic assessment of national interests. We hope that the new dispensation under President Zuma will be more attuned to the day-to-day needs of ordinary South Africans. Zimbabweans in South Africa want to go home. If Jacob Zuma wants to create a million jobs, he can do no

better than to create the conditions that will help Zimbabweans do what they want to do: to return home and make a living among their own families and communities. The alternative is further stress on service delivery—and on a social fabric that is already groaning under the weight of migrant Zimbabweans. It is vain to believe that Zimbabweans can be prevented by force or by regulation from coming and staying in South Africa. Faced with hunger and abuse at home, they will continue to come.

In all this we are not naive about Zanu. It will require more than polite talk to push a group of delusional political deviants to hold free and fair elections. Zimbabwe's post-independence history shows that the barest shreds of humanity, let alone democratic norms, mean nothing to Zanu when confronted with a loss of power. As we speak, Zanu-PF, the party of violence, has deployed soldiers to mobilise brown-shirt brigades against the people. Rewarded by the spoils of blood diamonds, they have been instructed to kill and wreak havoc. We may yet see violence of an unprecedented nature. Mugabe's madness is underway. It must be exposed by people like you.

I am sure South Africa's negotiators have seen glimpses of this radical self-centredness in recent months. But it goes further than

they might imagine. It is a fact that Zanu collaborated with the Apartheid government at the same time as it played host to ANC representatives in the 1980s. Moreover, it collaborated with the Apartheid regime in the brutalisation of its own people. In 1983, at the height of Matabeleland massacres, Emmerson Mnangagwa requested material assistance from the South African Defence Force. It is also a fact that Mugabe used Central Intelligence operatives, many of whom had served under Ian Smith, to monitor ANC cadres while they were in Zimbabwe. Ironically, one of those placed under surveillance was Thabo Mbeki.

Zimbabweans themselves need little reminding of the character of Zanu's criminal mindset. We have seen Zanu slay our people, felt its cruel rod on our backs, its boots on our necks. We see the guilty mock us every day. It is a system and a perverse ideology—but it is much more than that. It is deeply personal. Those who butchered the Ndebeles were rewarded and now queue up to succeed Mugabe. This junta laugh and leer, they ridicule the blood and tears of the people. We know they will not go quietly. We hope and pray for a non-violent transition—but we do not expect it. Yet, against all odds, we will achieve the dream of a new Zimbabwe built on justice and dignity. What we have is not good enough. No. We want and deserve something better. We want to be free—

totally and completely free of the Zanu pestilence. Free to build a future for ourselves and our children.

I sense that this is the last chance for a peaceful resolution. Let us not beat about the bush: if Zanu will not accept the will of the people, what remains for Zimbabweans? How long must we suffer these humiliations and degradations? Long, long ago, mass mobilisation became a moral right. SADC is at a crossroads. Will it do what is right? If it will not, Zimbabweans cannot continue to be trampled, to be taken for granted. We must shoulder the burden, we must take control of our destiny, we must seize our birthright—and we will.

I thank you and wish you all a peaceful, blessed Christmas and ask humbly that you write for, and in the interests of, the aspirations of ordinary Zimbabweans.