

Taking On the Big Man

Morgan Tsvangirai has been attacked and arrested for challenging Zimbabwe's despot Robert Mugabe. Now he may be on the verge of unseating him

BY ALEX PERRY/CAPE TOWN

MORGAN TSVANGIRAI HAS BEEN THIS close before. In 2002 he was widely thought to have won Zimbabwe's presidential election, beating the country's tyrannical leader, Robert Mugabe. But according to most independent observers, Mugabe had the results fixed, extending his tenure as Zimbabwe's only ruler since independence in 1980. Now Tsvangirai is trying to avoid being robbed again. Results of the March 29 general election have not yet been announced, but the Zimbabwe Election Commission indicates that his Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has seized the parliamentary majority from Mugabe's Zanu-PF. Tsvangirai is sure he's won the presidential vote. But

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—MORGAN TSVANGIRAI, ZIMBABWE'S MAIN OPPOSITION LEADER

Mugabe, 84, is demanding a recount and a runoff for the presidency, fueling fears of another vote fix. His supporters have launched a campaign of violence across the country. Tsvangirai calls it "a de facto military coup."

Tsvangirai is trying to fight Mugabe in the courts and persuade other African countries to pressure one of the continent's last Big Men—powerful figures who, like Mugabe, led their nations to independence from colonial rule but then turned into despots—to go quietly into the night. Zimbabwe's turn, says Tsvangirai, is long overdue. Speaking to *TIME* by phone from an undisclosed location in Zimbabwe, he said, "We need to shift from focusing on our

independence and start focusing on our prosperity and freedom."

It will be a long battle. Decades of misrule have turned Zimbabwe into an economic basket case. Inflation is 100,000%, unemployment 80%, and up to 1 million people (out of a population of 12 million) have fled to neighboring South Africa. "We are very conscious that it's very difficult to fight dictatorship with democratic means," Tsvangirai says. "We're taking on the whole edifice, a dictatorship that has been institutionalized into all the organs of state. It's a very big mountain we have to climb." If replacing Mugabe isn't hard enough, ruling the country he leaves behind will be a herculean task.

Tsvangirai, 56, became accustomed to responsibility at an early age. The son of a carpenter and bricklayer from Gutu, south of the capital, Harare, and the eldest of nine, he quit school early to work the nickel mines of Mashonaland in northern Zimbabwe. In 10 years, he rose from plant operator to general foreman. Under the white government of the time, there was more than one way for a political aspirant to agitate for change. Mugabe fought for freedom; Tsvangirai chose the mine-workers union. In 1980, Mugabe, then 56, inaugurated a free Zimbabwe. Eight years later, Tsvangirai became secretary-general of the Zimbabwean trade-union movement. Outraged by Mugabe's growing tyranny, Tsvangirai's unions broke with the state.

The move earned him admirers and enemies. In 1997 a group of men thought to be from Mugabe's secret service, the Central Intelligence Organization, burst into Tsvangirai's 10th-floor offices in Harare and tried to hurl him through a window, but Tsvangirai fought off his attackers. He formed the opposition MDC in 1999. Despite at least three other attempts on his life and, according to the MDC, four arrests, he has fought Mugabe in every election since.

The physical contrast between Tsvangirai and Mugabe emphasizes the gulf between them. Tsvangirai is ebullient and casual, wears cowboy hats and has the burly figure of a man fond of food. Mugabe sports a tiny Hitler mustache and favors tailored suits but sometimes wears shirts and baseball caps bearing images of his own face. The two men appeal to different sections of Zimbabwean society—Mugabe to rural villagers and liberation stalwarts, Tsvangirai to the young and the urban.

Tsvangirai is short on specifics of how he would improve on Mugabe. The emphasis is on doing what the 84-year-old has not done. The opposition's manifesto promises "a sound economy, agriculture and livelihoods, a new constitution and good governance"; leadership on HIV/AIDS, which has infected 2.3 million people; and empowering the youth. In a softening of Mugabe's policy, white-owned farms would not be handed back to their former owners. Rather, the government would curb "corrupt and self-serving" land seizures while remaining committed to "systematic land reform that benefits the black people of Zimbabwe." On the question of whether to hold the Mugabe regime accountable for its crimes, Tsvangirai has offered to be flexible in order to secure its departure.

Tsvangirai's record as Zimbabwe's main opposition leader has some blemishes. In 2005 the MDC split in two after a breakaway faction questioned what it perceived as Tsvangirai's autocratic tendencies. The division led to doubts about his leadership skills. "There are some real concerns about him and his ability," says Alex Vines, head of the Africa Program at Chatham House in London. Tsvangirai's response: "Every leader has his faults. I am not a perfect human being." After 28 years of Mugabe, Zimbabweans may be happy to settle for less than perfect. —WITH REPORTING BY WILLIAM LEE ADAMS/LONDON