

The Precipice

Written by Administrator
Sunday, 28 August 2016 14:04 -

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Eddie Cross Harare, 27th August 2016

Yesterday was a bizarre experience. In the morning I planned to take part in a march that was due to be led by 18 political parties to the Headquarters of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission where a petition on electoral reform was to be handed over. All previous MDC marches had been peaceful, happy events, virtually no Police presence and not a hint of violence or trouble.

Well before I got to the rallying point, I saw people running and vehicles turning around and going back the way they had come. This was two hours before the event was due to start. When I got to about a kilometer from the point we were meant to start from, I saw the first tear gas and water cannons.

I saw a group of young people looking down the road and stopped to ask what was happening. They said "we got clearance from the Courts to march and were going to Freedom Square (Zanu PF calls it Robert Mugabe Square) when we were tear gassed by the Police". They advised me it was dangerous to go any further. I proceeded to the collection point through rock strewn roads, burning tires and saw running battles between young people and the Police. I saw water cannons in action with blue dye in the water and one machine putting out a fire.

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The main road through the City was totally deserted, the Agricultural Show grounds, normally packed with visitors and opened officially the previous day by the Vice President of Sierra Leone, was also abandoned – not a vehicle in sight, the only people were the Police and the small running groups of protestors. There was drifting clouds of tear gas and smoke everywhere.

I left the area and drove to Parliament to wash my face and get the tear gas out of my eyes. Then I tried to go back but was completely blocked by cars fleeing the battles in the CBD. Subsequently the street battles raged over much of the City, business closed down and the streets deserted. The army was deployed and helicopters were put up to monitor the people.

Was there any need for this? Absolutely not! I had participated in four previous marches and had not felt for one instance, any threat or danger. Just cheerful thousands celebrating their right to protest the state of crisis through which we are all living. The violence was instigated by the Police who were totally responsible for what followed. I had previously warned colleagues in Parliament that the tension on the streets was palpable and that everyone needed to be careful when handling any protests.

The previous Wednesday, a tiny demonstration by 200 MDC Youth in the CBD had also been attacked by the Police – perhaps more justified because they were defying a decision to turn down their request to demonstrate. But what then happened should have taught the authorities a lesson – the general population joined in and mayhem reined for the next 4 hours eventually shutting down the whole City. Cars were burned, shops looted and a great deal of damage was done.

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Yesterday, I drove away from the mayhem in the CBD and went to my next meeting which was a lunch with the Centenary Club – now over 120 years old and located in the Royal Harare Golf Club. I ordered a coke and sat on the balcony and watched the golfers and their caddies on the freeways. It must be one of the finest golf courses in the world, certainly one of the most beautiful.

The Club was busy, the car park full of expensive cars, the waiters courteous and well trained, the weather perfect. It was a world away from the harsh realities just 4 kilometers away.

Zimbabwe always confuses visitors – they stay in our expensive hotels and resorts, enjoy the friendly people and the near complete safety on the streets. See our packed Churches on Sundays and play golf or watch cricket in circumstances that rival the very best.

An inch away from all of that is another reality – 5 million people on the edge of starvation and being fed by the international community, 90 per cent unemployment, banks with their doors closed because they have no cash, one third of all children are orphans, the lowest per capita incomes in the world. Corruption that takes a third of all we produce out of our mouths and is then used to feed the appetites of a tiny minority who are wealthy by any standard. A President who drives in a cavalcade that would do Obama proud and flies to Singapore once a month for a medical checkup in one of the most expensive clinics in the world.

But it cannot go on for much longer, the disparities are just too great, the suffering of the great

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majority has gone on for too long and the people's legendary patience is running out. Zimbabwe is on the edge of a precipice and its own leadership has not got a clue about what to do. Certainly what they did yesterday was not the sensible thing to do in any way.

This week the Elders – a grouping that includes Tutu, Mrs Mandela and Annan, called on the SADC leadership, meeting this weekend in Swaziland, to recognise that the crisis in Zimbabwe must be addressed. They noted that a peaceful, dignified, legal and democratic transition is possible, but only if leadership is exercised. Left to our own devices with a paralysed leadership, we can only commit suicide.

In Tolstoy's play "The Cherry Orchard", a scarecrow in a wheat field plays a key, if symbolic role. In Zimbabwe, the Old Man of the country was taken from his bed, given a shot of something by his doctors and then trundled out in public to show that he was alive. He nearly fell as he climbed out of his car, had to be helped to walk in slippers at the Show Grounds and then sat silent and half asleep while the Vice President of Sierra Leone opened the Show. This is the leadership that is supposed to guide Zimbabwe away from the precipice. It is just not possible and everyone can now see that.

Like the scarecrow in Tolstoy's play, he is not going anywhere and this shameful farce in terms of leadership continues while Zimbabwe burns. Our national debt is now approaching 3 times our GDP; interest on the debt alone is equal to one third of all State revenues. The budget deficit has spiraled out of control. The Civil Service is being paid with virtual money by electronic means but they cannot draw their salaries out of the banks. Even a child can sense that this state of affairs simply cannot go on.

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South Africa has suddenly woken up as a result of a massive collapse of the trade with Zimbabwe. Tens of thousands of South African industrial jobs are at stake. Suddenly they appreciate that there is a leadership crisis in the country and that the crazies in the G40 and the Presidents bedroom are trying to take power from the scarecrows hands. That would toss us out of the frying pan into the fire.

The international Community agrees with the Elders that an orderly rescue mission is possible and could result in a legal, democratic transition. But it is not going to happen by itself. Leadership of a high order is required and quickly, or else this country is going to plunge over the edge of the precipice and will in turn drag the dual worlds represented by our smoking streets and the Harare Golf Clubs down together into the abyss.