

## Zimbabwe's power-sharing deal

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### 1. The application:

This study was carried out as a group project by students, and uses all three sides of the Power Cube – particularly spaces and forms of power – to explore an extraordinary political process, removed from citizens and normal political practice but with huge implications for both.

### 2. The case:

In early 2009 a power-sharing deal was agreed between the ruling and key opposition parties in Zimbabwe, keeping Robert Mugabe in power with his rival, Morgan Tsvangirai, becoming Prime Minister. This deal was struck following a violently contested election process in 2008 in which Tsvangirai and his Movement for Democratic Change apparently beat Mugabe and his Zanu PF party in the first round, an outcome which Mugabe refused to accept.<sup>1</sup> The arrangement splits power between the two parties by allocating them specific rights in decision making and over particular government bodies, and to each appoint a proportion of Cabinet roles.

The process of arriving at this settlement took place behind closed doors, in a forum of SADC (the Southern African Development Community) with South African President Thabo Mbeki taking the key mediating role. Neither Zimbabwean civil society actors nor international donors – with both of whom Zanu-PF had a historically tense and suspicious relationship – were included in the process, and the decisions reached were made without broader consultation with the Zimbabwean population.

### 3. The analysis:

**An invited/closed space:** Firstly, the power-sharing deal took place in a very particular kind of space. Formally it was an 'invited' space, in that Thabo Mbeki invited the players to come together under the umbrella of SADC in order to resolve their differences. But the list of invitees was extremely restricted – perhaps appropriately for a process of arbitration as this, at one level, was – but less appropriately for deciding the outcome of an ostensibly democratic decision-making process, an election. From the perspective of civil society, other development actors, and Zimbabwean citizens it was effectively a closed space.

**A regional level process:** Secondly, the decision took place at the level of the Southern Africa region – apparently rejecting the validity and relevance of either the national level or the wider global level. Whilst the case does not go into these details, drawing attention to the level at which power was exercised certainly raises interesting questions about the significance of this: what does it say about the Zimbabwean government and nation state that the outcome of its election process could not be resolved at a national level?

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And to what extent was the choice of Southern African neighbours over a wider international community a statement by Mugabe or SADC that they reject the role of international players in shaping African politics?

**Hidden and Invisible power:** Both the nature of the space and the choice of a regional forum become more significant when the power dynamics that were at play in this process are unpacked. On the surface, this was a mediation space in which arguments from either side would be mediated and resolved on a rational basis – through a visible decision-making process (albeit only visible to those within the closed space). Beneath the surface, however, the realities of the relationships between the players in the room probably played a much larger role. Hidden power – the mobilisation of bias – was evident in the key role played by Mbeki, by no means a neutral player with respect to Zimbabwe but one with multiple and deep-rooted obligations to Mugabe and Zanu PF. As the agenda-setter for this mediation process he created a space in which Mugabe and Tsvangirai were treated on far from equal terms.

This was demonstrated by actions which also perhaps point to invisible power – the internalisation of unequal power, or adherence to ideology over interests – at work. Apparently, within the negotiations, Mugabe was treated as if he were still the legitimate leader of Zimbabwe, despite the outcome of the first round election having selected Tsvangirai. In contrast, Tsvangirai was invited into the process as a privilege rather than a right. In other words, the participants in the process appeared to be somehow inclined to treat Mugabe as the dominant figure in the room despite his lack of formal authority – pointing to an underlying set of power relationships which have nothing to do with what was going on at an observable (visible or hidden) level. Similarly, no condemnation was voiced about the violence that Mugabe’s party had unleashed on supporters of the opposition (and random members of the public) despite such practices being a perfectly legitimate thing for neighbouring countries (or indeed the international community) to comment on in other circumstances. If resistance was present it was kept very quiet in this space.

#### **4. Implications & significance**

Using the power analysis tools this study goes beyond noting that the process happened ‘behind closed doors’, to explore what went on behind them. In doing so it brings into focus the significance of inter-personal and historical relationships in shaping political decisions. In this case it perhaps suggests that the non-participatory nature of the process was possibly less significant than the embedded power relationships between leaders within the region, and the ability of powerful players to choose the forums in which things are decided, to suit their own advantage....