Zimbabwe’s Economic Meltdown: Are Sanctions Really to Blame?

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Since the early 2000s, Zimbabwe has been under sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union that have shaped Zimbabwe’s domestic politics as well as the country’s relations with Western nations. The Zimbabwean government under President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was inaugurated on November 24, 2017, blames the sanctions for the country’s economic meltdown—Zimbabwe is currently facing foreign currency and cash shortages, an inflation rate of 288.5 percent from October 2018 to October 2019, and excessive utility costs and low wages resulting in drastically decreased demand for goods and services. Most citizens are now subjected to extreme poverty. The Zimbabwean government has made multiple attempts to rally anti-sanctions sentiment, but sanctions have largely been maintained.

The Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) government’s first anti-sanctions campaign took place in 2011 when then-President Mugabe and his leadership launched the National Anti-Sanctions Petition Campaign rally in Harare on March 1, 2011. The main Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party led by then-Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai...
(who held a position separate from that of president) boycotted the whole campaign and mobilization. Through this campaign, ZANU–PF mobilized politicians, civil servants, captains of industry and commerce, traditional leaders, farmers, and ordinary people to sign petition forms calling for the removal of sanctions. Although ZANU–PF reportedly secured (in some cases under duress) over two million signatures, the United States and European Union did not remove the sanctions. ZANU–PF certainly knew that its anti-sanctions campaign would not lead to the removal of these embargoes—it only wanted to conscientize citizens that the country is under siege from an external “enemy.”

The most significant recent anti-sanctions campaign took place on October 25, 2019, a day declared by ZANU–PF, the president’s political party, to be a national holiday to call for the removal of the US and EU sanctions on Zimbabwe. Mnangagwa himself presided over the main anti-sanctions event in the capital, Harare, while provincial ministers led similar events in other provinces: Bulawayo, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Midlands, Masvingo, Manicaland, and Mashonaland East.

Two factors led ZANU–PF to resuscitate its anti-sanctions campaign in 2019. First, the ZANU–PF government gained support for its anti-sanctions stance from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU). Since 2002, ZANU–PF had been using sanctions to whip up pan-African rhetoric and mobilize the African continent against what it regards as imperialist interference. On August 18, 2019, at its summit held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, SADC set October 25 as the date for member states to call for the lifting of sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe. Second, facing rapid economic decline since October 2018, the ZANU–PF government has found sanctions as a readily available scapegoat for economic hardships faced by the people of Zimbabwe.

By examining the perspectives and arguments from domestic and regional political and social groups, the United States, and the European Union about whether the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe are indeed to blame for the country’s economic hardships, this article ultimately contends that the government’s recent anti-sanctions campaign targets its domestic constituency, which is reeling under economic hardships, for political effect rather than serving as a sincere move to get the US and EU embargoes lifted. Reflecting the pitfalls often found in economic sanctions in general, these sanctions have failed to push the Zimbabwean government to adopt political reforms and are instead being used as a scapegoat to the detriment of Zimbabwean citizens while the
economy deteriorates. Dialogue and negotiations initiated by SADC and the AU between the Zimbabwean government and the United States and European Union may yield better results.

**Reasons for the Sanctions**

In 2000, then-president Robert Mugabe and his ZANU–PF government initiated violent expropriation of land from White farmers and distributed it to Black people without compensating the former. The ZANU–PF government justified this move by arguing that it addressed land ownership imbalances that were caused by colonial rule. Intimidation and political violence instigated by ZANU–PF leaders, supporters, and the security sector marred the 2000 parliamentary elections. As a result of this violence and disregard for White farmers’ property rights over land, human rights abuses, and unfair electoral practices, both the United States and the European Union imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe. The country has now been under sanction for two decades.

**US Sanctions**

In 2001, the United States enacted the Zimbabwe Democracy and Recovery Act (ZIDERA), which imposed an arms embargo on Zimbabwe and required US representatives at international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the African Development Bank (AfDB) to vote against the extension of debt relief and multilateral financing to the government of Zimbabwe.

On March 7, 2003, through Executive Order 13288, the United States imposed “targeted” sanctions by issuing travel bans and asset freezes on individuals accused of undermining democratic processes and corruption in Zimbabwe. Most of these individuals were senior figures in ZANU–PF, the government, and the security sector. The 2003 Executive Order also prohibited US citizens and companies from engaging in business with the sanctioned individuals as well as specified companies and organizations associated with them.

Since 2003, the United States has sanctioned over 130 individuals and 60 companies. Most individuals on the sanctions list have only been removed after their death. On August 1, 2019, the United States added to the sanctions list the commander of Zimbabwe army’s presidential guard unit, Anselem Sanyatwe, for his alleged role in the 2018 post-election violence in which the army killed six civilians and injured more than a dozen. As of October 20, 2019, the list included 100 individuals (including President Mnangagwa), 13 state-owned enterprises, 13 “other” enterprises, 25 farms and 3 ZANU–PF-owned enterprises.
Sending a clear message that it was not moved by the anti-sanctions event that took place in Harare on October 25, 2019, the US State Department added Zimbabwe's Minister of State Security and one of Mnangagwa's top allies, Owen Ncube, to the sanctions list before the end of the day. The US State Department banned Ncube from entering the United States, arguing that he has engaged in “gross violations of human rights.” On October 31, 2019, Zimbabwe's late foreign affairs minister, Sibusiso Moyo, released a statement denouncing the US move as “unjustified.” He also warned the US Embassy in Harare, particularly ambassador Brian Nichols, against contravening “acceptable diplomatic etiquette” by interfering in local political affairs after it criticized the government's anti-sanctions campaign.

Currently, there is a deadlock between the Zimbabwean and the US governments. The Zimbabwean government is not making political reforms. The US government is maintaining the embargo, and it is even adding more Zimbabwean political elites to the sanctions list. The new US administration led by President Joseph Biden has indicated that sanctions will remain in place if the ZANU–PF government fails to implement political and economic reforms. On March 3, 2021, President Biden renewed sanctions on Zimbabwe, citing human rights abuses and harassment of opposition activists, trade unionists, and journalists in 2020. It is therefore clear that successive US governments are determined to maintain sanctions on Zimbabwe.

EU Sanctions
Just like the United States, the European Union imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe in February 2002. EU sanctions targeted individuals within ZANU–PF, the government, the security sector, and their associates. These individuals were, and in some cases are still, barred from traveling to the European Union, and their assets in EU member countries were frozen. The European Union also imposed an arms embargo on Zimbabwe's security sector. After the 2008 electoral violence mainly perpetrated by the security forces and ZANU–PF youth militias, the number of individuals and entities under EU sanctions reached all-time highs of 203 and 40, respectively.

After ZANU–PF formed a power-sharing government with the two opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) parties in 2009, there was improvement in the respect of human rights and the rule of law, and a framework for constitutional reform was established. Governance improved, and there was
noticeable economic growth as evidenced by GDP growth of 8.1 percent in 2010.\textsuperscript{21} The number of people and entities under EU sanctions started to decline. In 2010, the European Union scrapped nine entities from the sanctions list.\textsuperscript{22} In February 2012, the European Union began dialogue with Zimbabwe aimed at strengthening bilateral co-operation between the two.\textsuperscript{23} After a successful constitutional referendum in 2013, the European Union suspended restrictive measures on most individuals and entities. As of 2016, only Mugabe and his wife, Grace, and five senior figures in the security sector remained under travel restrictions and asset freeze.\textsuperscript{24}

In 2019, the European Union held two political dialogue meetings with Zimbabwe focusing on trade and investment, democratization, and governance. By October 2019, when the anti-sanctions campaign was resuscitated, the European Union had no trade sanctions and had only a few individuals under its targeted sanctions. Mugabe died on September 6, 2019, leaving his wife, Grace, on the EU sanctions list. Besides these, only three high profile securocrats remained under EU travel bans and asset freeze.\textsuperscript{25}

Despite the relaxation of sanctions, the relationship between Zimbabwe and the European Union remains frosty over human rights, electoral, and governance issues, and the EU arms embargo on Zimbabwe are still in place. Signaling its policy toward Zimbabwe after leaving the European Union, on February 1, 2021, the United Kingdom imposed its own travel bans and asset freezes on four individuals linked with the security sector for human rights abuses since President Mnangagwa took power in November 2017.\textsuperscript{26} On February 19, 2021, the European Union renewed its sanctions, citing the ZANU–PF government’s failure to implement the promised political and economic reforms and continuing human rights violations.\textsuperscript{27} Nonetheless, Zimbabwe is currently not under any hemorrhaging UK and EU sanctions, as the ZANU–PF government wants to portray.

**Political Tensions**

Since his ascendancy to power on November 24, 2017, Mnangagwa, through his mantra “Zimbabwe Is Open for Business,” has attempted to re-engage the United States and European Union to have the sanctions removed.\textsuperscript{28} However, the United States and European Union insist that Zimbabwe should implement political reforms before the embargoes can be lifted.

The Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Amendment Act of 2018 set benchmarks for the country’s engagement with the United States.\textsuperscript{29} These include holding free and fair elections, adhering to constitutionalism, upholding the rule of law and human rights, adopting economic reforms to facilitate economic development and reduce unemployment, adopting good governance, and respecting the opposition political parties.\textsuperscript{30}
Of the above benchmarks, the 2018 election was the first test. However, while the US International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) noted improvements in the electoral process as compared to the previous elections, they also expressed deep concerns. They noted, for example, the misuse of state resources and the involvement of civil servants and traditional leaders in ZANU–PF’s campaign activities. IRI and NDI recommended an amendment to Zimbabwe’s Electoral Act to ensure that the law has provisions that penalize traditional leaders and civil servants for taking part in political campaigns. So far, nothing has been done to implement the above reforms. The United States therefore believes that the Mnangagwa government has not reformed and will not do so soon.

Similarly, in its report on Zimbabwe’s 2018 elections, the EU Election Observation Mission (EUEOM) lamented that, among other concerns, the state-controlled media was biased in favor of the ruling ZANU–PF party. The EUEOM also raised concerns with draconian laws such as Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, Broadcasting Services Act, Public Order and Security Act, and some sections of the Criminal Law that have not been rationalized with the 2013 Constitution on fundamental rights such as freedom of association, assembly, expression, and access to information before, during, and after the elections. The United States and European Union believe the above laws work to the advantage of the ZANU–PF government in suppressing opposition political parties and civil society organizations (CSOs). The United States and European Union want these concerns to be addressed in the political reforms.

Even after the 2018 elections, Western countries raised concerns about human rights with the Mnangagwa government. Academics Gladys Hlatywayo and Charles Mangongera noted that while civic space for CSOs increased between November 2017 and the July 2018 elections, it rapidly shrank soon after the elections as the government feared the organizing capacity of social movements to dislodge it from power. They noted that the Mnangagwa government view some CSOs as instruments of Western countries’ regime change policy and that there has been increased surveillance over their activities by civilian, police and military intelligence agencies. It appears that the Mnangagwa government is sliding into authoritarianism reminiscent to that of the Mugabe regime.

Between January 14 and 16, 2019, the army, police, and ZANU–PF militias violently suppressed protests organized by social movements against a fuel price
A report produced by the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum revealed that during this period, there were 17 extrajudicial killings, 26 abductions, 81 gunshot injuries, 586 assaults, and 954 arrests. Facing domestic and international pressure, the Mnangagwa government, just like the Mugabe regime, has adopted anti-West rhetoric. For example, the government blamed the West for protests that took place in January 2019.

Following the brutal crackdown on a demonstration organized by the main opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A), on August 16, 2019 the head of the missions of the European Union and the United States issued a strong joint statement condemning the intimidation, harassment, and physical attacks on human rights activists, trade unions, civil society, and opposition leaders. They also urged the government to urgently implement the political and economic reforms to address socio-economic challenges in the country. The Zimbabwean government responded by accusing the European Union and the United States of bias in favor of the main opposition MDC-A and of interfering with the country’s internal affairs.

Are Sanctions Responsible for Zimbabwe’s Economic Challenges?

In the anti-sanctions speech delivered at the National Sports Stadium in Harare on October 25, 2019, Mnangagwa, just like his predecessor Mugabe, denounced sanctions, blamed them for causing economic hardships, and called for their complete and unconditional removal. The SADC issued a similar statement on the same day, agreeing that the sanctions affect business entities in Zimbabwe. They also agreed that sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe have a negative effect on ordinary Zimbabweans, who are denied economic opportunities as well as reasonable wages, and called for the removal of sanctions “to pave the way for socio-economic transformation and economic development of Zimbabwe.” The regional bloc stressed that mass emigration from Zimbabwe, allegedly a result of economic decline caused by sanctions, has burdened the social services of neighboring countries. Besides, SADC lamented that Zimbabwe’s agricultural productivity has declined, and this threatened regional food and nutrition security. SADC also stated that the lifting of sanctions would increase economic and political co-operation for the SADC region with the United States and European Union.

The continental bloc, the AU, released a statement in solidarity with both the government and people of Zimbabwe and SADC. The AU lamented that US and EU sanctions “continue to have negative impact on the economy and the people of Zimbabwe” and called for their immediate removal. In a show of support, Tanzania, Mozambique, and the Pan-African Parliament sent representatives...
in solidarity to deliver anti-sanctions messages at the main event in Harare. South Africa’s governing African National Congress made video clips denouncing sanctions and called for their removal. To a large extent, ZANU–PF has succeeded in gaining the support of governments and former liberation movements in the SADC region, and the AU in denouncing and calling for the removal of sanctions.

The ZANU–PF government, SADC, and other critics argue that the whole nation has effectively been put under a punitive sanctions regime. The Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ), which provides “expert” criticisms of US and EU sanctions, avers that the embargoes have far-reaching negative financial consequences for the country. However, there has been wide variation in the estimated cost of sanctions on Zimbabwe, even by figures given by ZANU-PF and the government which the party runs. In its 2013 election manifesto, ZANU-PF claimed that since 2001, US and EU sanctions in the form of financial and trade embargoes, travel bans and diplomatic isolation costed the country US $42 billion. In his 2014 national budget statement, the Minister of Finance and Economic Development, Patrick Chinamasa, claimed that US and EU sanctions had cost Zimbabwe US$6.1 billion since their imposition. However, the United States and other entities dispute these claims.

Relationships with Financial Institutions

Statistics released by the RBZ in October 2007 (the most recent available), indicated in Figure 1, show that between 1980 and 1999, Zimbabwe had cordial relationships with multilateral financial institutions.
relations with multilateral financial institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and AfDB, and it enjoyed the balance of payments (BOP) support. But according to the RBZ and the Zimbabwean government, declared and undeclared sanctions in the early 2000s caused multilateral financial institutions to suspend Zimbabwe from BOP support, technical assistance, voting rights, and access to funding resources such as foreign lines of credit.\textsuperscript{46}

However, a close look at these RBZ’s statistics in Figure 1 reveals that AfDB and IMF stopped supporting Zimbabwe by way of the BOP in 1998 and 1999, respectively—well before the United States imposed ZIDERA on Zimbabwe. This decline in support was due to the Zimbabwean government’s failure to repay loans and implement neo-liberal economic reforms recommended by these international financial institutions.\textsuperscript{47} The US Department of State similarly asserts that the Zimbabwean economy was in decline well before the enactment of ZIDERA in 2001 and the imposition of targeted sanctions in 2003.\textsuperscript{48} This puts the RBZ’s sanctions narrative into question.

In addition, the US embassy in Harare averred that while ZIDERA requires US representatives at international financial institutions to restrict the extension of US debt relief to Zimbabwe, this has never been put into practice. The embassy emphasized that the United States has never invoked ZIDERA because Zimbabwe fails to meet the political and economic reforms needed by international financial institutions for debt relief and for lending to be extended.\textsuperscript{50}

**Trade and Humanitarian Assistance**

The United States argues that despite its targeted sanctions, its trade with Zimbabwe doubled in the period of the latter’s steep economic decline from 2003 to 2008, as illustrated in Figure 2.\textsuperscript{51} It stated that US companies invest and sell goods in Zimbabwe and stressed that it promotes trade between the two countries and is a “a friend of the people of Zimbabwe.”\textsuperscript{52} The United States avers that its trade with Zimbabwe only declined in 2009 due to the impact of the global financial crisis. Between 2001 and 2010, the United States gave over US$1.4 billion in assistance to Zimbabwe, including US$175 million to mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS and US$61 million in development programs assistance,\textsuperscript{53} and has invested over US$2 billion in humanitarian and development aid in Zimbabwe since 2010.\textsuperscript{54} Thus, Washington dismisses Harare’s assertions that US sanctions are detrimental to the overall Zimbabwean economy.

Just like the United States, the European Union continues to provide humanitarian assistance to Zimbabwe, mainly through NGOs. The European Union also maintains that its sanctions have not contributed to the economic downfall of Zimbabwe.\textsuperscript{56}
Foreign Direct Investment

In 2006, the RBZ claimed that the negative publicity generated by the sanctions increased the perception that Zimbabwe was a risky investment destination. Figure 3 shows that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows declined from US$444.3 million in 1998 to a paltry US$3.8 million in 2003. This huge decline was further exacerbated by the economic sanctions imposed by the United States and European Union in 2003. The data on FDI inflows are aggregated from various sources and reflect the overall trend of inward investment into the country. The significant drop in FDI suggests a marked reduction in investor confidence, which is likely to have a detrimental effect on the Zimbabwean economy in the long term.
disparity suggests that FDI has been declining since the late 1990s, once again well before the 2001–03 imposition of US and EU sanctions and negative publicity on Zimbabwe.

FDI inflow has remained below US$50 million every year from 2000 to 2006, and the RBZ argued that low investment levels contributed to shortages of foreign currency, fuel, and raw materials. However, FDI inflows increased significantly since 2009, when a power-sharing government was formed. In 2017, the Zimbabwe got US$349 million in FDI. The foreign business community’s hope that the fall of Mugabe would bring significant economic reforms led to a marked increase in FDI inflow to US$745 million in 2018. However, when it became apparent that the country still had an unstable political environment, FDI inflow significantly decreased to US$280 million in 2019. The country currently has a FDI stock of about US$5,713 million, while its value of greenfield investment projects (lasting investments where foreign companies start by constructing buildings) is about US$709 million. Since 2009, FDI has generally increased in Zimbabwe despite sanctions, though it is still low. These figures put the narrative that sanctions led to decline in investment into question.

In 2007, the Zimbabwean government claimed sanctions negatively affected the operations of NGOs, which are mainly funded by Western countries. The RBZ claimed that most NGOs realigned their policies after consulting their home governments and either withdrew or froze development assistance programs in the country. A combination of low investment and reduced NGO activity worsened socio-economic conditions, especially affecting ordinary people and vulnerable groups. For example, children, women, and the elderly suffered from malnutrition. The RBZ also claimed that the healthcare system malfunctioned as the government hardly afforded to purchase enough medical equipment and drugs needed in hospitals. The above claims and assertions show the extent to which the Zimbabwean government blames US and EU sanctions for socioeconomic challenges in the country.

Zimbabwean Public Perception

The ZANU–PF government has attempted to rally citizens against sanctions and has used the embargoes to gain political capital. The first ever national opinion survey on US and EU sanctions on Zimbabwe was conducted in May 2009 by Afrobarometer—an organization that conducts surveys on citizens’ perceptions of democracy, governance, and socio-economic conditions in Africa. The survey (see Table 1) revealed that respondents were divided on the impact of sanctions on the economy.

The United States and European Union argue that since their sanctions are imposed on a few individuals and companies and do not affect the broader
economy, they are “smart” and “targeted” toward those individuals who violate human rights, undermine democracy, and engage in corruption. However, very few respondents believed the sanctions are targeted. Forty-nine percent of the 2,400 adult Zimbabweans sampled agreed very strongly that sanctions caused economic hardships and should be lifted. Few Zimbabweans, only 15 percent, strongly agreed that sanctions were only targeted at a few individuals and should remain in place.

The second Afrobarometer opinion survey, also shown in Table 1, was conducted in October 2010. The survey revealed that the ZANU–PF government was losing the public relations battle on the sanctions issue. In a sample of 2,400 respondents, 42 percent of the respondents agreed very strongly that sanctions were causing economic hardships and should be removed. Thus, there was a decline of 7 percent as compared to the previous opinion survey. The percentage of respondents who strongly believed that sanctions were only targeted at a few individuals who violate human rights, undermine democracy, and engage in corruption was only 15 percent.

### Table 1. May 2009 and October 2010 Afrobarometer Survey Results—Zimbabweans’ Opinions on International Economic Sanctions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Sanctions</th>
<th>May 2009 Survey</th>
<th>October 2010 Survey</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement 1:</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>48%</td>
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<td>Agree very strongly with 2</td>
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<td>10%</td>
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<td>Agree with neither</td>
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<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>7%</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Statement 2:</td>
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<td>Rural</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree with neither</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
individuals who were resisting change and should remain in place stood at 13 percent—a decline of 2 percent since the 2009 survey. The percentage of people who believed that sanctions were causing the suffering of ordinary people also declined, probably because, despite sanctions, the economy and living conditions had greatly improved since 2009, when a coalition government comprising ZANU–PF and MDC parties ruled the country. Logically, some citizens likely questioned the prima facie narrative that sanctions were causing economic hardships. Most significantly, however, a respectable, though declining, percentage of Zimbabweans believed sanctions were causing economic hardships and should be removed. Also noteworthy is that few people believed sanctions are targeted and should be maintained. These statistics suggest that, at least in 2009 and 2010, the Zimbabwean public was quite favorable to the ZANU–PF regime’s narrative.

Although the leaders of some opposition political parties attended the October 2019 anti-sanctions event in Harare, the leaders of the main opposition political party, the MDC-A, and most CSOs stayed away. And though the government offered buses to transport people and provided food at the main event in Harare, the turnout was low: only between 15,000 and 20,000 people showed up against the government’s expectation of 60,000. The poor attendance raises questions about whether citizens believe the government’s explanation of the nature and impact of US and EU sanctions in general or agree with the anti-sanctions campaign in particular. However, some sections of the business community in Zimbabwe also testified in 2019 that sanctions have made it difficult for local banks to provide loans to entrepreneurs. The above evidence reveals that Zimbabweans have mixed opinions over the sanctions issue.

**Misgovernance as an Alternative Cause of Hardship**

Besides the violation of human rights, one of the most contentious issues between the ZANU–PF government, the United States and European Union, and local opposition forces is misgovernance. While Mugabe’s departure and Mnangagwa’s ascendency to the presidency brought a lot of hope for good governance and anti-corruption reforms, this has remained a pipedream. Most CSOs believes the government lacks sincerity in its promises to introduce governance reforms.

In December 2018, the Zimbabwe Democracy Institute (ZDI) conducted a public opinion survey on whether corruption has declined since Mnangagwa’s ascension to the presidency. ZDI stated that 51 percent of sampled informants lamented that there was “no sign of genuineness” on the part of the government in fighting political corruption. The survey noted that “grand-scale corruption” linked to political elites’ patronage networks continue unabated. Hlatywayo and Mangongera stated that ZANU–PF uses the targeted measures as a scapegoat.
for economic decline despite grand corruption, patronage and destructive economic policies. Z

Zimbabwe’s main opposition political party, the MDC-A, holds that, through the anti-sanctions campaign, the government wanted to deflect citizens’ anger on the deteriorating economic situation. The MDC-A leader, Nelson Chamisa, avers that Zimbabwe’s economic challenges are a result of failed leadership, corruption, bad governance, and illegitimacy. On October 24, 2019, a day before the anti-sanctions campaign, the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum released a statement condemning the government for abductions and torture of trade union leaders.

The US embassy also posits that Zimbabwe’s economic challenges are a result of corruption and asserts that the country can only get out of its economic quagmire by implementing the necessary political and economic reforms. On the same day as Mnangagwa’s October 25, 2019 anti-sanctions speech, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee stated that the Zimbabwean government was attempting to shift the blame for the country’s deteriorating economic situation by pointing fingers at US and EU sanctions. The Committee chairman, Senator Jim Risch, stressed that the ZANU–PF government was responsible for Zimbabwe’s economic and political challenges. Risch stated that the Zimbabwean government should put more effort, time, and resources on political and economic reforms stipulated in ZIDERA than on the “anti-sanctions campaign.” In a thinly veiled attack on SADC and AU, Risch stated that regional organizations should support democracy rather than authoritarian and neo-patrimonial regimes.

As Mnangagwa was delivering his anti-sanctions speech at the National Sports Stadium, EU ambassador to Zimbabwe, Tim Olkkonen, told HStv journalists that Zimbabwe’s economic meltdown is not a result of EU sanctions, but of misgovernance and corruption by the ZANU–PF government. Olkkonen emphasized that the European Union would not be moved by the anti-sanctions campaign but would only change its policy after seeing the ZANU–PF government implementing genuine political and economic reforms. In a tweet, EU ambassador to the AU Ranieri Sabutucci said the EU bloc does not have sanctions on Zimbabwe, but it was engaging the country on development issues.

While sanctions partly contributed to Zimbabwe’s economic challenges, to a large extent, misgovernance and grand corruption are responsible for the
current economic meltdown—and sanctions are merely being used as a scapegoat by the Zimbabwean government.

Effectiveness of Economic Sanctions

Given the widespread controversy over the US and EU sanctions, it is important to know whether this method can actually achieve what is intended, or if there are preferable alternatives. It is clear that the United States and the European Union are, at least outwardly, using the sanctions to advance foreign policy goals such as enhancing human rights and democracy in Zimbabwe. However, analysts and scholars debate the true purpose of sanctions and how effective they are at achieving foreign policy objectives. In this section, US and EU sanctions on Zimbabwe are located within the wider views and debates on sanctions by erstwhile scholars, and their implications on economy, human rights, and democracy are assessed.

Objectives of Sanctions

These sanctions have a variety of objectives. Economic sanctions are typically used as foreign policy tools to “pressure the target country to conform to the sender’s demands.” Objectives include ensuring compliance, deterrence, and regime change, and ideally, sanctions should work with diplomatic measures to persuade, rather than punish, the target country. Richard N. Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, however, has observed that the United States has used sanctions far more than any other country for reasons varying from promoting human rights to the desire to overthrow foreign governments.

In the case of Zimbabwe, the US and EU sanctions aim to push the Zimbabwean government to adopt political reforms that can lead to tolerance of opposition groups, free and fair elections, and respect of the rule of law and human rights. In addition, the United States and European Union want the Zimbabwean government to adopt economic reforms that can lead to good governance, economic growth, and improved living standards of ordinary people. These objectives are, however, disputed by the Zimbabwean government, which insists that US and EU sanctions are imperialist tools designed to interfere with Zimbabwe’s internal affairs and remove ZANU–PF from power.

Meeting Foreign Policy Goals

Recent literature suggests sanctions have mixed outcomes depending on the nature of the targeted regime. Respected sanctions scholar and University of Memphis Professor Dursun Peksen advances that the effectiveness of economic sanctions varies with the targeted regime. He notes that economic sanctions
are less effective on single party and military regimes which use authoritarian institutions and repression strategies to minimize the impact of sanctions. He also advances that single-party and military regimes are less likely to make concessions and change their policies in the face of foreign sanctions. However, he also noted that economic sanctions tend to be more effective on personal regimes because the latter lacks strong institutions and often rely on external support and aid to minimize or weather the impact of sanctions.80

In general, researchers agree that targeted foreign countries often continue to pursue disputed policies whether the sanctions cause minimal or maximum economic damage.81 This assessment holds true in Zimbabwe, where two decades of US and EU sanctions have failed to compel the ZANU–PF government to uphold democratic values and respect human rights.

International Politics Professor Daniel Drezner, however, dismisses conclusions that sanctions are ineffective as inaccurate. He argues that sanctions work if their objective is clear and if they impose a high economic cost—and unilateral US sanctions such as freezing assets, undermining the targeted country’s currency, and denying the targeted country access to the World Bank and IMF assistance are effective. Drezner contends that, ceteris paribus, the United States has capacity to use sanctions to weaken a target’s economy and gain diplomatic leverage. However, Drezner admits that sanctions tend to be more effective when they have the imprimatur of multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations, when all countries involved are resolute, and when they have limited ambitions. Drezner further posits that although sanctions have been less effective in countries such as Serbia and Iraq, they diplomatically isolated and crippled the regimes in question.82

While the diplomatic isolation and the weakening of the former regimes in Serbia and Iraq raises moral questions, they show that sanctions can be successful as a coercive foreign policy tool. In his more recent work, Drezner has argued that since sanctions are often a preferable policy to other foreign policy instruments, policymakers should concentrate on improving their effectiveness, eradicating their negative consequences on civilian populations, and minimizing their unintended political outcomes in the targeted country.83

Recently, US foreign policy researchers Elizabeth Rosenberg and Jordan Tama have developed a more nuanced assessment of US sanctions. They concur with erstwhile scholars that, in most cases, the United States imposes sanctions in order to change the policy of the targeted state. Rosenberg and Tama further advance that US sanctions often deter the targeted regime from taking an unwanted policy, but they rarely change a policy already in place, known as failure to compel. Furthermore, Rosenberg and Tama note that sanctions hardly produce capitulation, especially when they are imposed unilaterally. For example, US sanctions failed to effect regime change in Cuba and Venezuela.
However, they advance that US sanctions are most effective in signaling US goals and its possible future plans with the targeted country. In the case of Zimbabwe, US and EU sanctions have not resulted in significant policy change. However, the two powers showed their disapproval of the ZANU–PF government’s domestic policies through the imposition of sanctions. Although ZANU–PF has remained in its authoritarian path, this disapproval can play a role in deterring other governments in Africa and other parts of the world from taking unwanted policies.

**Enhancing Human Rights**

The impact of sanctions on human rights has also been debated. Since the end of the Cold War, sanctions became a frequently used tool in advancing human rights in countries such as apartheid South Africa and Haiti. Scholars George A. Lopez and David Cortright demonstrate that the use of sanctions to promote human rights in targeted nations often has a paradoxical result: the intensification of human rights abuse. Lopez and Cortright note that the crippling impact of sanctions on the economy and infrastructure of the targeted country may weaken social welfare nets and worsen “second order” rights. This effect worsens the socioeconomic conditions of vulnerable groups such as women and children, who often depend on assistance from the state and international development agencies. Lopez and Cortright make reference to the case of Iraq in the 1990s, where the humanitarian impact of sanctions raised serious questions about their legitimacy. Thus, if not well designed, sanctions can prove illusory.

As mentioned above, the RBZ, Zimbabwean government, SADC, and AU have all lamented that US and EU sanctions cause socioeconomic suffering of ordinary Zimbabweans, particularly the elderly, women, and children. While this view is subject to debate, Lopez and Cortright’s view that sanctions violate “second order” rights cannot be totally dismissed in the Zimbabwean case.

**Advancing Democracy**

Scholars and analysts similarly debate the impact of sanctions on democracy, with many suggesting that sanctions are an obstacle to democracy in the targeted country. Academics Ella Shagabutdinova and Jeffrey Berejikian argue that when sanctions cause economic pain across a broad social spectrum, elites rarely change their behavior; instead, they use sanctions to conceal their own failures. A sanctioned government often becomes less conciliatory and will show its resolve to stay in power by suppressing opposition groups. Academics Dursun Peksen and
A. Cooper Drury advance that economic sanctions are an impediment to democracy in the targeted country. They hold that a regime under sanctions will regard external pressure as a threat to national sovereignty and the regime’s longevity, and that sanctions are often used by the targeted elites to justify buttressing authoritarian rule and restricting domestic political liberties. In such cases, for the targeted regime, sanctions are a boon rather than a bane.

Just as the theory prescribes, the ruling ZANU–PF government has blamed opposition forces for working in cahoots with the United States and European Union to effect regime change in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwean government refuses to adopt and implement political reforms that could open democratic space by insisting that sanctions should be removed first. The political standing of the main opposition party, the MDC-A, has been weakened by the fact that regional governments are more focused on calling for the removal of sanctions than for democratization in Zimbabwe. Consequently, Zimbabwean security forces have not shied away from harassing opposition leaders and supporters in the country.

A Better Design

Scholars have suggested a better design of sanctions to reduce human suffering and pitfalls on democracy in targeted countries. To minimize the suffering of ordinary people, Lopez and Cortright recommend the imposition of “smart” sanctions that only target those responsible for bad policies and actions. Smart sanctions involve restrictions of the targeted elites’ access to financial resources, seizure or freezing of accounts, travel restrictions, and arms embargoes. Shugabutdinova and Berejikian opine that smart sanctions are more effective, humane, and effective at promoting human rights than traditional comprehensive trade sanctions. Smart sanctions have also been recommended to promote democracy and weaken authoritarianism. Lopez and Cortright posit that the imposition of targeted sanctions minimizes the rally-round-the-flag effect, a situation where citizens support the government because there is a real or perceived external threat. Financial sanctions have the extra advantage of denying the targeted elites resources needed to garner broad political support. Lopez and Cortright believe that targeted sanctions and deliberate creation and support of domestic opposition is more likely to achieve democracy. They regard this as “equalization of power” between the government and opposition.

The United States and the European Union have maintained that their sanctions on Zimbabwe are “smart” and “targeted” and do not affect the ordinary
people—but the Zimbabwean government argues that US and EU sanctions are neither "smart" nor "targeted." The Zimbabwean government asserts that US and EU sanctions are comprehensive and are designed to cause economic hardships on citizens so that they can vote ZANU-PF out of power. This complicates the Zimbabwe sanctions debate. To a large extent, whether they are targeted or not, US and EU sanctions on Zimbabwe adds to the list of global cases where sanctions have been futile in terms of advancing democracy, human rights, and good governance. Given the lack of clear evidence that sanctions have actually been effective in Zimbabwe, and the fact that they may instead actually be actively harmful to citizens of the targeted country, dialogue and negotiations between the Zimbabwean government and the United States and European Union are needed to yield better results than sanctions have to date.

Options for a Way Forward

It seems US and EU sanctions will remain on Zimbabwe if the ZANU–PF government continues to violate human rights and refuses to implement democratic and governance reforms demanded by Western countries. This article attempts to offer recommendations that, if implemented, could break the impasse between the Zimbabwean government and the United States and European Union on the sanctions issue.

First, the US and EU sanctions should be lifted unconditionally. These sanctions have been in place for almost two decades and have failed to persuade or coerce the ZANU–PF government to adopt and implement political and economic reforms—in fact, ZANU–PF strategically uses these sanctions to its advantage. In an interview with TRT World, Gift Mwonzora, a Zimbabwean scholar at Rhodes University in South Africa, claimed that the ZANU–PF government is deliberately not implementing political and economic reforms, instead blaming the sanctions for socioeconomic problems in the country.  

Another reason sanctions should be lifted is that they are used to cover up corruption. As noted by Drezner, measures to evade sanctions or weather their impact often leads to corruption, black market trade, smuggling, and other criminal activity by some citizens of the targeted country. Harare-based freelance journalist and writer Cyril Zenda revealed that in Zimbabwe, most government transactions are now done in secrecy on the pretext of busting sanctions, thereby creating conditions suitable for corruption. While the ZANU–PF government and the United States and European Union play
their blame game, Zimbabwean citizens continue to suffer from economic problems caused by misgovernance and corruption, and these problems are partly worsened by sanctions.

Second, Zimbabwe, the United States and European Union should enter into political dialogue and negotiations in which they take bold and sincere moves. Such dialogue should involve organizations friendly to the Zimbabwean government, such as SADC and the AU. These organizations can provide moral suasion and diffuse ZANU–PF’s umbrage to what is otherwise constructive criticism on human rights, democracy, and good governance. Such negotiations should be mediated by internationally recognized statesmen of unquestionable integrity.

Third, Zimbabwe needs a holistic multi-stakeholder approach involving government, the military, opposition political parties, CSOs, the church, and business to resolve its multi-layered, multifaceted, and manifold political and economic crisis. The issue of sanctions is intertwined with other contentious issues such as legitimacy, human rights abuses, electoral malpractices, misgovernance, and corruption, all of which need to be resolved by dialogue and negotiations involving various stakeholders. Again, such a dialogue should involve local and international mediators of unquestionable integrity. If the above recommendations are adopted with great circumspection, they can go a long way in resolving the toxic Zimbabwe sanctions logjam.

This article has shown that the debate on Zimbabwe sanctions is complex. The resignation of Mugabe and the 2017 ascendency of Mnangagwa to the presidency gave hope that Western embargoes would be lifted. The United States and European Union believe Zimbabwe is not yet on the path to democracy and constitutionalism, and they have maintained sanctions and demanded genuine political reforms. With support from SADC and the AU, ZANU–PF has emboldened its anti-sanctions rhetoric. The responses of the United States and European Union to the anti-sanctions campaign indicate that the embargoes will remain for some time. As the sanctions debate continues, ordinary Zimbabwean citizens, who are treated as collateral damage, reel under economic hardships. At the present, it seems that internal dialogue within Zimbabwe and dialogue between the Zimbabwean government and the United States and European Union is the most viable option to resolve the economic, governance, and human rights crisis in Zimbabwe.

Notes

1. Industrial Psychology Consultants, Cost of Living Expenses Report (Harare: IPC, October 2019), 5, 7. As indicated on page 7 of this report, the World Bank defines “extreme poverty” as surviving under the International Poverty Line (IPL), which stands at US $1.90 per person per day or US$9.50 per day for a family of five. This means a family
that lives under US$285 (ZWL$3,200) per month is considered to be living in extreme poverty.


49. RBZ, Mid-Year Monetary Policy Statement, 101.


58. RBZ, January 2006 Monetary Policy Statement, 8.


60. RBZ, Mid-Year Monetary Policy Statement, 2, 9, 99–100.


71. “Zimbabweans March Against EU and US Sanctions.”


74. Karombo, “Use Your Energy on Reforms.”


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