

# Review

## *Revolt and Protest: Student Politics and Activism in Sub-Saharan Africa*

*Leo Zeilig (IB Tauris, London, 2007)*  
*Reviewed by David Renton*

Read Leo Zeilig's history of recent student protests in sub-Saharan Africa immediately following the latest presidential elections in Zimbabwe. On the radio I could hear Tendai Biti, a former student activist, now secretary general of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), warn of the danger of violence. He predicted that President Robert Mugabe's supporters in the governing Zanu-PF would wreak havoc on those who voted for the MDC in Zanu strongholds such as Mashonaland.

Biti was a socialist student activist in the 1990s and later a trade union lawyer. In 2000, he was a founder member of the MDC and then an MP. When he joined the MDC, it lacked youth structures. Often they were formed by taking structures of the student union Zinsasu, and renaming them MDC youth branches.

Biti is one of a large number of former student activists who have played prominent roles in the MDC. Others include Arthur Mutambara, Nelson Chamisa, Brian Kagoro and Munyaradzi Gwisai.

Zeilig tells the story of this generation; how it came into the student movement and how that background continues to shape present-day politics.

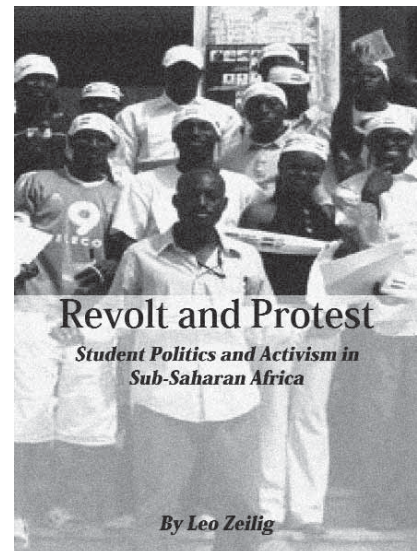
First, he argues that student activism in Zimbabwe and in Africa means something different from 15 or 25 years ago. In 1984, the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) had only 2 705 undergraduate students. Most lecturers were white. The

library was well stocked. Students got generous grants – as late as 1995 they got Zim\$17 000 per year, several times more than the salary of a teacher. Students had spare money to support relatives. They were a privileged group.

But as students became more critical of Mugabe's regime from the late 1980s on, the government became unwilling to sponsor them. University funding was reduced. Student numbers increased without new investment in buildings or libraries. In 1997, the government reduced student grants from 75% to 50% of total funding with the rest available in loans. In 1998, catering and accommodation were privatised.

This led to further violent student protests. In June 1998 the UZ campus was closed for five months as a result of protests against late payment of grants. A student song compared Mugabe to the recently-toppled Indonesian president Suharto: 'Suharto has gone; he has been overthrown with fire. If you also want to move forward, you must remove Mugabe.'

Secondly, Zeilig argues that students played an important role as detonators of working-class struggle. From 1996 to 1998, Zimbabwe went through mass strikes, a 'revolutionary rehearsal'. There were strikes by health workers, nurses, doctors, teachers, civil servants and almost every branch of the public sector. Rural labourers began to invade large commercial farms. There was a two-day general strike against taxation in



1997. Housewives led bread riots in 1998. In parts of the country, student activists linked with workers. They produced leaflets and slogans, 'Workers be resolute! Fight on!' which became common language in the workers' movement.

Third, Zeilig suggests that activists between 1989 and 2000 were shaped by changes in global politics.

Mutambara was president of the student representative council at UZ in 1988, and called an anti-corruption demonstration, which was when students first came into conflict with the regime. He describes visiting the East German, Chinese and Russian embassies in the years before the collapse of communism. He read Marx's *Capital* at university. He was aware of socialist critiques of Russian communism.

Track forward a dozen years, and many of the same ideological influences were present. There were still activists at UZ arguing for socialism.

One difference was that a new

model of regime change took hold with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The idea of democratic change, led by intellectuals assisted by foreign intervention seemed more attractive, and more reasonable than people rising by their own power.

For students who protested in 1998, the formation of the MDC was exhilarating. In 2000, despite widespread Zanu-PF violence in which 57 people died, the MDC almost won parliamentary elections.

The formation of the MDC however concealed a contradiction. Some who compared Mugabe to Suharto imagined a popular uprising like the Russian revolution of 1917. Others however preferred a softer, more peaceful route: protests advocating democratic principles and human rights rather than socialism, and the appeasement of foreign interests with their different notions of regime change in Zimbabwe.

A key test has been the MDC's response to Zanu-PF's 'left turn' after 2000. To survive, the Mugabe regime reinvented itself as the government of the peasantry, and promised to redistribute white farms to many rural poor. The farms however went to leading members of Zanu. Rather than criticising the regime for hypocrisy, the MDC allied itself to white farmers and their backers in Britain and the US. Once a party formed by unionists and student protesters, it now opened up to forces to its right. The MDC lost the momentum to Mugabe. Former activists in the MDC with a few exceptions (notably, Highfield MP Munyaradzi Gwisai) were silent as their party moved to the right.

Politics in Zimbabwe then took on the form that makes it confusing to the outside world. Zanu-PF is contemptuous of workers' rights. It has arrested, tortured and killed opponents. It presides over price rises which have left the population poorer than ever before. Yet it speaks

a language of socialism and African people's struggle. Journalists in Britain or America who oppose the Bush government are quoted favourably in official Zimbabwean government newspapers. Against the regime, is the MDC formed by unionists and activists with its front benchers including bankers and financiers. Its criticisms of the regime come from the right and the left.

Fourth, Zeilig sees a depoliticisation of student protests in recent years. By 2003, the MDC's struggle began to lose energy. It was clear many people would vote for the MDC, but it was also clear that Zanu-PF retained the support of the country's majority living in the countryside. A pattern arose where Zanu won elections narrowly with the use of force and fraud. This demoralised MDC voters in cities.

This cycle of hope and defeat was felt on campuses. John Bomba, a student activist in Bulawayo told of how in 2002, students complained at price rises by local traders. Students were keen to keep down the price of their staple, bread buns. The student union announced the capping of buns. When one trader refused to recognise the cap, students looted his shop. A vision of international socialism and human solidarity was diminished by the struggle for survival in a country ruined by inflation.

Fifth, Zeilig suggests that resistance on campuses has been commodified. International charities and NGOs calling for democracy are visible in Zimbabwean life, at the same time that workers' and students' protests have lost energy. NGOs make large sums of money available to the 'right sort' of protest leaders, ex-students, moderate rather than militant, opposed to Mugabe's land reform.

In a situation where Zimbabweans are becoming poorer, a human rights campaigner who offers supporters

free beer will get a hearing. In the student movement, there have been attempts to contain this. But it is difficult to campaign against commodification, when NGOs have the money and access to printing and resources.

Zeilig is supportive of the part played by activists from the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) of Zimbabwe. ISO is almost the one tendency to be honest about the problem of commodification and serious about fighting it. Munyaradze Gwisai was an ISO and MDC MP until 2002. It was ISO members who pushed hardest for the alliance in 1998 between students and workers.

A number of MDC leaders are ex-ISO members, including Mutambara and Biti. But ex-members are not necessarily found on the MDC left.

The crisis in Zimbabwe is extreme. People have experienced unprecedented poverty for more than 10 years. Many have left the country. Protests have challenged the regime profoundly, and yet it remains in place.

To save Zimbabwe from further dictatorship, it will require the conscious activity of tens of thousands of people, in civic organisations and in unions.

The mass protests of 1996-1998 show the heights to which resistance can rise. If there is to be a Zimbabwean intifada, however, the mistakes of the MDC must be learned and it must change direction.

The strength of Zeilig's book is that by drawing on the memory of past struggles it begins to chart how this could happen. LB

*David Renton is a housing and trade union activist in London. Leo Zeilig is willing to provide electronic copies of 'Revolt and Protest' for free to SALB readers, simply email the editor with your request: salbeditor@icon.co.za*