



# Fixing One of the World's Most Broken Education Systems

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*When David Coltart took over as Zimbabwe's minister of education, only 2 percent of schools were open.*

Last week, I sat down with David Coltart in the Cato Institute's new library in Washington, DC, to talk about Zimbabwe. I had not seen Coltart in three years and I was eager to find out what was the political and economic situation in his country since the 2008 power-sharing agreement that, among other things, made him into the only white member of Zimbabwe's cabinet.

Coltart was in town lobbying for the removal of targeted sanctions on Robert Mugabe and his inner circle. While Coltart, a human rights lawyer, is a [vocal opponent of Mugabe](#) -- and a member of the rival political party -- he says he believes that the sanctions cause the country more harm than good and provide the autocrat with a convenient scapegoat. Dressed in a suit that has clearly seen better days and sipping a real coke (no ice!), Coltart opened up about his love for his country and hopes for a better future.

## **What was the state of education in Zimbabwe when you became the minister of education in February 2009?**

In 2008, we only had 28 full teaching days. When I took office in February 2009, 98 percent of all schools were shut and 90,000 teachers were on strike. Exams from the previous year were still unmarked. There was no money for education in the government's budget, and textbook-to-pupil ratio was 15-to-one. My department was not computerized and our data collection system had collapsed. Basically, the education system was in an extreme crisis.

## **What have you accomplished since taking over and what are the most pressing challenges remaining?**

First, I established an open-door policy and a rapport with teachers' unions, which the previous minister ignored and treated with suspicion. I allowed parents to pay performance incentives to teachers whose salaries were a mere \$100 per month back then. Those policies resulted in teachers returning to work and today the teacher attendance rate is excellent. I set up an education transition fund that allowed the USA, UK, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand to bypass Zimbabwe's government

and help to finance our education system directly. I also managed to break a domestic textbook publishing cartel -- three Zimbabwean companies that colluded to make windfall profits. I authorized UNICEF [the United Nations Children's Fund] to hold an international tender and the cost of books came down to 70 cents from five dollars. Textbook ratio fell to 1-to-1 and is now the best in Africa.

The review of the national curriculum remains a problem. Last reform of the curriculum was in 1986. It is clearly very outdated, but some in ZANU-PF [Zimbabwe African National Union -- Patriotic Front, the ruling party] are being obstructionist, because they fear the introduction of civic education and a more objective, non-partisan history syllabus. Another problem is that teachers are still paid only half [\$400] of what their South African counterparts earn. We also worry about the physical security of the teachers. Teachers are held in high regard -- especially in the rural areas -- where the ZANU-PF has traditionally been relatively strong. Teachers are usually victimized during elections, because people vote in schools and teachers are viewed as sympathetic to the opposition. My worry is that in case of renewed violence, teachers will be targeted and leave again.

**The Movement for Democratic Change, a Zimbabwean political party of which you are a member, has been in a power-sharing agreement with Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF since September 2008. How has the relationship between the two parties evolved over the last three years?**

It started as very tense and distrustful. Later it has evolved into a more functional relationship, not quite cordial, but functional. There is some close cooperation between the MDC and more moderate elements within the ZANU-PF. There has even been the occasional support in the cabinet and parliament for policies proposed by the MDC.

**Considering that the ZANU-PF has retained control over the police, military and the Ministry of Information, what has been done to increase political freedom -- including freedom of information, speech, and assembly -- in Zimbabwe?**

The media laws have been relaxed. Two independent newspapers -- *The Daily News* and *Newsday* -- are operating freely and doing well. Unfortunately, there has been little liberalization when it comes to the broadcast media, such as the radio and TV, which remain under ZANU-PF control. Internet is uncensored and widely available, but it is relatively expensive. Freedom to protest is limited by the Public Order and Security Act.

**How were the events of the Arab spring perceived in Zimbabwe? What do you think are the prospects for political awakening in Africa in general or Zimbabwe in particular?**

The Arab Spring was met by a mixed set of emotions. The ZANU-PF was horrified and tried to clamp down on videos of protests in North Africa, and responded by arresting anyone who suggested that similar protests would be a good idea in the Zimbabwean context. The civil society

proved remarkably unresponsive. A lot of people are tired of the struggle. Let us also not forget that much of the human capital -- our best and brightest -- have left Zimbabwe and live abroad.

**Do you expect the next parliamentary and presidential elections, which are to be held next year, to be peaceful, free, and fair?**

I don't expect them to be completely peaceful or totally fair, but I am hopeful that they will be much freer than last time. There is potential that they will be the best elections so far. The legal environment has improved. We will have better election laws this time around. Also, one of the key benefits of being in the same room with our opponents for three years is that they treat us with diminished hostility.

**Some analysts predict that the power-sharing agreement will continue after the elections. Is that a likely scenario?**

It is certainly a possibility. One scenario that I can envisage is collaboration between the moderate wing of the ZANU-PF and the MDC. The benefit of this arrangement would be to pacify the military and prevent a coup d'etat [by forces loyal to Mugabe] after an expected MDC win. That would benefit the MDC, while allow the moderates within ZANU-PF to have a stake in the future.

**What can the international community do to help in a peaceful transfer of power from the ZANU-PF to the MDC?**

I think that the West should be more proactive. Some countries have largely disengaged from Zimbabwe and that has played into the hands of the hardliners in the ZANU-PF. If the Western countries reengage, ordinary Zimbabweans will be more confident that the process of democratization will go on and succeed in the end. Ordinary Zimbabweans will see that there are tangible benefits to an alliance with the West and to democracy. Moderates in the ZANU-PF also need to be reengaged -- they have the power to keep the military in their barracks.

**Having shrunk 40 percent following Robert Mugabe's expropriation of commercial farmers, Zimbabwe's economy is growing again. What are the main drivers of growth?**

The main drivers of growth are primarily mining (platinum, gold, and diamonds), tourism, and aspects of agriculture (tobacco and cotton). Industry has also picked up, but industrial capacity utilization is still very low.

**Some economists believe that growth is driven by extractive industries, while the rest of the economy -- such as manufacturing -- suffers due to the lack of the rule of law, indigenization policies, etc. Zimbabwe remains one of the least economically free countries in the world. What, if anything, is the government doing to improve the business environment?**

This is a highly controversial area, because of a fundamental disagreement between the two parties. The ZANU-PF is pushing for indigenization -- or redistribution of 51 percent of shares in businesses to African hands. Ostensibly, this measure is to benefit ordinary Zimbabweans, but in reality it will only benefit senior ZANU-PF leaders. There is, consequently, a lot of hostile rhetoric that deters domestic and foreign investment. The MDC recognizes the need for empowerment of ordinary Zimbabweans, but also the need for a good business environment, including low tariffs and low taxes. We want to move beyond relying on extractive industries and "grow the cake." As the cake grows, more Zimbabweans will benefit. The ZANU-PF wants to redistribute the current cake, especially to its cronies. The ZANU-PF is not ignorant of the requirements of competing in a global economy, but they are self-interested and greedy. They see indigenization as electorally popular and they like a discretionary business environment that allows them to collect rents and bribes.

**What is the role of the Chinese in the Zimbabwean economy and also in terms of propping up Robert Mugabe?**

The Chinese role in the economy is increasing. China is a source of cheap imports: clothes and food. That is not a bad thing per se, but our business environment is so bad that it does not allow our domestic firms to compete with the Chinese. They have received huge infrastructure contracts -- like rebuilding the Victoria Falls Airport -- and contracts to build roads. Most of the work is performed by the Chinese, not Zimbabweans. The Chinese are also heavily involved in the mining sector, especially in the mining of diamonds. There is precious little transparency and we see almost no revenue from the diamond mines. Where is all that money going? Is it going to the military or to ZANU-PF? I fear that may be the case. The Chinese are also constructing a huge military intelligence training center worth some \$70 million for the ZANU-PF- controlled Ministry of Defense. So, there is plenty to be concerned about.

**Tens of thousands of highly educated people have left Zimbabwe, but many would like to return to their homeland one day. What would you say to them, regarding their current and future prospects for making a decent living?**

At present, it is very difficult to attract Zimbabweans back to Zimbabwe. We have very few jobs for professional and skilled people. We need them, but we cannot promise much to them at present. They have to come home with their eyes wide open. Much will depend on the outcome of the next election. Zimbabweans abroad must perceive changes in Zimbabwe as fundamental and irreversible. But without the return of these skilled Zimbabweans, future economic growth will be stunted.

**Zimbabweans like to say "We make a plan," which underlines their resolve in the face of crises. What is the general morale of the country these days, since hyperinflation has been tamed? Do people feel like the worst is behind them, or is there a widespread cynicism regarding people's ability to pursue their livelihoods?**

It is a mix. People's lives have improved. We now have a currency (the U.S. dollar) that retains its value, and shops and pharmacies are full. Development indicators are improving. But many

Zimbabweans fear that the hardliners in the military will take the country back to 2008. There is also a growing cynicism over politicians of all stripes, including some in the MDC. People see a huge difference in wealth between the political class and the rest, and they do not like it. The challenge for the MDC is to show people that it will fundamentally change politics in Zimbabwe. People do not want to see a change of faces at the top with no change in their lifestyles.