

TO VICTORY?



Robert Mugabe (left) is almost 90 years old, but looks to have the measure of Morgan Tsvangirai (above). Election posters for next week's poll (below) adorn walls in Harare. Photos: AFP, Reuters



land reform program, announced it would not "continue swimming against the current". According to CFU vice-president Peter Steyl: "We have finally realised that the land reform is irreversible. There has been a change of heart. We have realised that we cannot carry on like this."

Part of the turnaround in Mugabe's fortunes is attributable to Zimbabwe's resurgent economy. After more than a decade of hyperinflation and economic contraction, Zimbabwe's economy grew by what the IMF called a "buoyant" 9 per cent in 2011. This was followed by a respectable 5 per cent last year.

China's emergence as a major investor in Zimbabwe's mining sector and as the country's largest export partner further convinced Western governments that economic self-interest should replace the moral high ground as the defining reference point for its policy on Zimbabwe.

The nation's voters also approved a new constitution this year that pays lip-service to human rights, providing some Western governments with the fig leaf they needed to hide their embarrassment over their about-face.

Within the country itself, even amid ongoing repression and political violence targeted at the opposition, the West's vilification of Mugabe appears to have backfired: "He was over-toxified in the first place," says Petina Gappah, a prominent Zimbabwean intellectual and opposition supporter. "This idea of Mugabe as Hitler? He's extremely charming and intelligent."

It has, however, been the performance of the erstwhile opposition while in government that has most helped Mugabe's comeback. Morgan Tsvangirai has seen his public image tarnished by a series of sex scandals, while he and other MDC officials have enriched themselves on the spoils of power and led increasingly lavish lifestyles in a country where the average worker earns less than \$US2 a day.

MDC councillors have been removed from office for corruption. And with power still largely concentrated in the hands of Mugabe and his supporters, the MDC has succumbed to the perils of incumbency without being able to achieve very much.

Tsvangirai "has been naive, falling into a trap set by Mr Mugabe to co-opt and compromise them", one Zimbab-

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wean activist told *The New York Times*.

"The power-sharing agreement could be the undoing of the MDC leadership," Raymond Majongwe, secretary-general of the 14,000-strong Progressive Teachers' Union and former supporter of Tsvangirai, said recently. "They exposed their own naivety and appetite for opulence and extravagance. In four years the level of wealth these MDC guys have accumulated is shocking. If the MDC wins the election, fine, they can go ahead and loot the country like their predecessors."

Tsvangirai's fall from grace has, of course, eroded his party's popular support. According to one opinion poll, the

MDC's support fell from 38 per cent to 20 per cent in the two years to 2012. During the same period, support for Mugabe's ZANU-PF party rose from 17 per cent to 31 per cent.

And even if Mugabe, backed by Zimbabwe's military, is unsuccessful in the elections, he appears prepared to hold on to power by any means possible.

"Security chiefs and some ZANU-PF leaders assert that they would not respect an MDC victory," said the International Crisis Group. "Military chiefs have always considered Mugabe as a safeguard for their economic interests and against prosecution for past human rights violations. An election result that threatens these benefits could encourage them to intervene."

Mugabe appears to have seen off domestic opposition to his rule, outlasted his international enemies and overseen Zimbabwe's return to prosperity, all without having to change his ways.

"Old Bob must be chuckling and enjoying himself right now," says political activist Munyaradzi Gwisai. "He has them right where he wants them."

Anthony Ham is a Melbourne journalist.