

## Tsitsi Dangarembga: Zimbabwe on road to starvation like Ethiopia, warns Booker longlist writer

The Times (UK) by Jane Flanagan

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The novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga was hustled into the back of police riot truck and detained overnight at the end of July - ZINYANGE AUNTONY/GETTY IMAGES

A week that began with a career high for Zimbabwe's most acclaimed novelist, a nomination for the Booker Prize, ended with her in a police cell for protesting the country's descent into tyranny.

[Tsitsi Dangarembga's](#) arrest typified the progressively brazen onslaught being waged by President Mnangagwa's regime against its critics that has prompted the most unified international denunciation of Zimbabwe since the worst excesses of Robert Mugabe.

Without urgent change, Dangarembga, 61, does not believe it a stretch to imagine the rife starvation seen in Ethiopia in the mid-Eighties recreated in Zimbabwe, southern Africa's former breadbasket. All the ingredients are in place, the author said in an interview with *The Times*. "It would be a continued slow implosion, a sort of black hole that sucks everyone into it.

"People often say that things can't get any worse. We will soon start to see what 'worse' looks like."

The UN has warned of a "rapidly expanding emergency" in which ten million Zimbabweans, two thirds of the population, will be famished by Christmas.

Much like the brutal Marxist oligarchy that presided over a million needless deaths that spurred the Band Aid phenomenon 36 years ago, Mr Mnangagwa's government is citing natural havocs beyond its control, as well as international sanctions and western meddlers, for its citizens' empty bellies.

In *This Mournable Body*, which is [longlisted for the Booker prize](#), Dangarembga depicts post-independence Zimbabwe in a narrative of gathering darkness, a wretched comparison with the hope she felt 40 years ago after returning from studying medicine at Cambridge. She did not have to look far for inspiration.



Dangarembga's arrest was typical of the increasingly public attacks on President Mnangagwa's critics  
ZINYANGE AUNTONY/GETTY IMAGES

"Wherever I go, there is an aura of dejection. When we say, 'We can't breathe,' we mean it," the writer said, nodding to a growing #ZimbabweanLivesMatter social-media campaign that echoes the Black Lives Matter protests. "There is this deprivation of hope, a kind of psychological torture."

Dangarembga, whose debut *Nervous Conditions* was the first book published in English by a black Zimbabwean woman and won the 1989 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for fiction, believes only Zimbabweans can end their misery. She has had a brief taste of the danger in that.

On the day of her arrest on July 31, when nationwide demonstrations were planned, the writer had left home in one of Harare's still-smartish suburbs to stage a snap protest with a friend. It was not long before they were hustled into the back of police riot truck and detained overnight. She is due in court next month after being charged with incitement to commit violence.

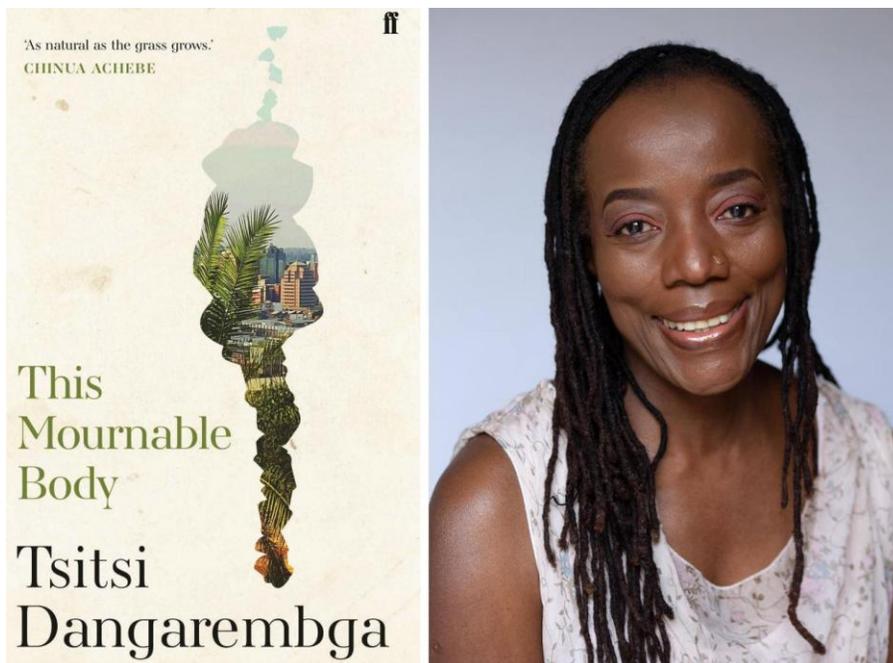
Others have not fared so well in an unyielding crackdown: the opposition MP Joana Mamombe and two female colleagues from the Movement for Democratic Change Alliance were recently abducted and claim that they were sexually assaulted and tortured.

The journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, who has exposed government corruption, is languishing in Zimbabwe's toughest jail. Mr Mnangagwa has warned other "bad apples" against following the "terrorist opposition". The president, 77, who was Mr Mugabe's enforcer for decades before turning on him in November 2017, last week rebuffed South Africa's attempt to mediate in its neighbour's deepening emergency, dismissing as "fabrication" any reports of strife.

A letter from Zimbabwe's Catholic bishops to the government this weekend condemning its "unprecedented crackdown on dissent" was met with a rebuke for the church leaders' "evil-minded" intervention.

Recent events lay bare not only the hollowness of the president's earlier claims to be "a new dispensation", but the power struggles raging within the ruling Zanu-PF party that are fuelling rumours of coup plots and murder.

[An unprecedented denial](#) in June by senior generals that a military uprising was afoot only amplified the speculation. The heavy-handed put down of protests that caught up Dangarembga was, reports have it, because generals who regret thrusting Mr Mnangagwa into power had planned to use unrest as cover for a putsch. Other whispers allege the president has demanded \$100 million "to go quietly" and cites assassinations, rather than Covid-19, as the true cause of a recent spate of reported deaths in the army's disgruntled senior ranks.



Dangarembga is longlisted for the Booker prize with her novel *This Mournable Body*  
2020 BOOKER PRIZE/HANNAH MENTZ/PA

Speculation about the unexpected demise of Perrance Shiri, a cabinet minister who also had a hand in the Mugabe ousting, is probably the most telling, according to Nic Cheeseman, a democracy expert at the University of Birmingham.

Mr Shiri, who was 65 and a retired chief air marshal, was purportedly acting as an intermediary between mutinous officers and Mr Mnangagwa. His death, in the early hours as he drove himself to seek help at a nearby hospital, two days before the July 31 demonstrations that had rattled the president, was instantly attributed by the authorities to the pandemic.

And only hours after his agriculture minister's passing, when the regime was expected to go into mourning for one of its most senior war veterans, Mr Mnangagwa pressed ahead with the announcement of the most significant land policy since the chaotic seizures ordered by his predecessor: a \$3.5 billion compensation package for displaced white farmers.

Even if poison and plot rumours sound far fetched, an unequivocal reality is driving them, Professor Cheeseman said. The president remains in hock to a resentful military and is presiding over unprecedented misery that is putting Zimbabwe's elite under intensifying international scrutiny.

Professor Cheeseman added: "The number of people who believe in the rumours, and the way the government seems to be responding to them, suggests they reveal a profound truth — Mnangagwa is fighting for his life."

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/world/tsitsi-dangarembga-booker-longlisted-novelist-warns-of-slow-implosion-in-zimbabwe-sd7vz5k9n>