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Brown and Bush should join Africa in talking to Mugabe

PETER KAGWANJA

Having lost all political battles to Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, the West should join Africa in hammering out a negotiated solution to Zimbabwe's economic and political crisis.

The clash between Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe and US President George W. Bush in the UN General Assembly on September 26 has escalated a seven-year Euro-African stand-off over the southern Africa state.

This tension born of conflicting responses to Zimbabwe's seizure of land owned by some 4,500 white farmers in 2000 forms a new a geo-political contest that is undermining the solution to Zimbabwe's crisis, now endangering regional stability.

In March 2007, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) launched a new initiative to bail Zimbabwe out of its economic woes, and mandated South African President Thabo Mbeki to find a negotiated settlement to the country's political impasse.

SADC's new initiative offers the best chance to resolve Zimbabwe's complex crisis. But it stands no chance unless Africa and the major Western powers rubbed the wrong way by Harare tone down their rhetoric, and rally behind the initiative. But for now, the pro-Mugabe circles in Africa and the anti-Mugabe league in the West continue to rattle their swords.

The run-in at the UN clouded the summit of SADC leaders in August in Lusaka, Zambia, and now hovers over the Euro-Africa summit in Portugal in December, which British Prime Minister will skip if Robert Mugabe will be there.

The tension between Zimbabwe's ruling elite and Tony Blair's (and now Gordon Brown's) administration has worsened the Africa-West face-off. Brown's Labour party has dominated the politics of Zimbabwe's colonial ruler, Britain, since 1997.

Now demonised as the archetypal tyrant, President Robert Mugabe was once hailed by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as "a man I can do business with." And, in 1994, Queen Elizabeth II bestowed on him an honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath.

Against this backdrop, the denial by the Labourites of Britain's colonial responsibility for land reform in Zimbabwe is widely blamed for touching off the crisis.

"I should make it clear that we do not accept that Britain has a special responsibility to meet the costs of land purchase in Zimbabwe," wrote Clare Short, then Britain's Secretary of State for International Development, to Zimbabwe's Minister of Agriculture and Land.

"We are a new government from diverse backgrounds without links to former colonial interests. My own origins are Irish and, as you know, we were colonized not colonizers," she added.

In 1997, Blair's New Labour reversed Britain's pledge to fund land reform, cutting short the "willing buyer, willing seller" programme on the basis that the initial £44million allocated by the Thatcher regime oiled cronyism rather than helping Zimbabwe's landless poor.

Thatcher's government had effectively gone back on the 1979 Lancaster Agreement, which according to Zambia's former president, Kenneth Kaunda (in the BBC Focus on Africa Magazine, July-September 2007) paved the way for Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 while requiring the black government to leave the issues of land "in the hands of the British government".

Furious, Harare's elite fast-tracked the land reform. Overlaid with a string of knee-jerk policies, the reform set off the fastest peace-time economic dip in history since Germany's Weimar Republic (overthrown by Adolf Hitler in 1933).

The economic dip has pushed one of Africa's strongest economies and regional breadbasket to the ropes: 80 per cent unemployment, nearly empty government coffers, collapsed services, an annual inflation rate of 18,000 per cent, and 4 million people reportedly starving.

The crisis has become a regional security and economic concern, triggering the exodus of no less than three million refugees into South Africa.

Zimbabwe may have lost the economic war, and the country teeters on the brink with a widening rift between the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the opposition the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). But Mugabe seems to have won every political battle with the West.

Fretting over a possible western-sponsored regime change, the Mugabe government has militarised Zimbabwe's public offices ahead of the 2008 elections. This has given rise to the idea of a 'creeping coup', with no less than 40 parastatal positions held by soldiers.

In mid 2005, the government launched "*Operation Murambatsvina*" (Drive Out the Filth). This was nothing but a demolition of informal settlements in Harare and other cities to nip in the bud a Ukrainian-style "orange revolution", effectively neutralising the opposition's urban support. *Operation Murambatsvina* destroyed the homes and livelihoods of 700,000 Zimbabweans and negatively affected 2.4 million more, according to a United Nations report.

The impact of Zimbabwe's politics and economic situation on the rest of Africa is mainly ideological. In the aftermath of the Iraq invasion in 2003, Mugabe and his compatriots have whipped nationalism to a fever pitch. "Our cause is Africa's cause," he told the fervently pro-Zimbabwe publication, *New Africa*, in May.

The row with the West has emboldened Mugabe, making him in certain quarters, an icon of African resistance, a liberation hero and a victim of racially-inspired retribution for seizing and handing over white farms to black Zimbabweans.

As the oldest freedom fighter still in office, Mugabe has always drawn the biggest applause in African leaders' meetings, including the August SADC summit.

Fears abound of the domino effects of the Zimbabwe land seizure in South Africa and Namibia where the bulk of the black population is still reeling under historical injustices relating to racially skewed patterns of access to resources and opportunities, particularly land.

The West has tempted South Africa to break ranks with pro-Mugabe forces and take a forceful stance on Harare, but the game of brinkmanship has narrowed down the policy choices available to the African National Congress leadership.

The ANC's liberation diplomats have struck out the military option on the list of choices available to solve the Zimbabwe crisis: Hard lessons were learnt from the 1998 military invasion of Lesotho to restore democracy, which drew the ire of Pretoria's neighbours as South Africa risked isolation farther afield in the continent.

Now Pretoria fears that owing to Mugabe's nationalist credentials and popularity, condemning him publicly would exacerbate South Africa's internal divisions over President Thabo Mbeki's successor. But it is also deeply wary of the heavy cost of a failed state on its doorsteps.

Unable to militarily stamp its authority as a regional captain, South Africa has pursued what its critics chide as "quiet diplomacy" in reference to the bilateral behind-the-curtains talks Pretoria has mediated between Zimbabwe's ruling party and the opposition.

Mbeki's mediation efforts between 2000 and 2004 yielded a new constitutional draft for Zimbabwe. However, the initiative was stillborn because Pretoria could not enforce it. In large measure, the "quiet diplomacy" effectively shielded Zimbabwe from international action, and the 65-year-old Mbeki has had a rough time getting the octogenarian Mugabe to take him seriously.

Sovereignty issues have also come into play. Pretoria's effort to use economic leverage by offering Zimbabwe a \$500 million credit line to pay the International Monetary Fund debt in return for governance reforms backfired. Zimbabwe rejected the offer and paid its \$300 million debt, precipitating frosty relations between Harare and Pretoria.

In February 2006, Mugabe told Pretoria's mediators to "keep away", accusing its southern neighbour of conspiring with the British to "use the fact of our owing the IMF to bring about the change of the regime here, squeezing us economically, so politically."

This marked the end of the road for quiet diplomacy, giving way to a stint of megaphone diplomacy.

"The wheels have come off there," declared South Africa Reserve Bank Governor, Tito Mboweni. In May 2006, Deputy Foreign Minister, Aziz Pahad, also decried "the deteriorating economic situation (in Zimbabwe)" and called for urgent action to halt the dangerous slide.

SADC has supported Zimbabwe. As a senior South African official intimated in February 2006, "Mugabe is larger than SADC".

Even though SADC leaders may disagree with him in private, few have had the courage to take Mugabe on in public.

Botswana's Festus Mogae, who blamed Zimbabwe's woes on a "drought of leadership", beat a hasty retreat, calling on the west "to supplement what we are already doing".

Zambia's Levy Mwanawasa, the new chair of SADC, who previously described Zimbabwe as a "sinking Titanic," made a u-turn, declaring that the country's problems were "exaggerated."

The 14-member regional bloc has insisted that Zimbabwe's "problems needed to be resolved because it was part and parcel of the SADC's economic development plans".

SADC's extra-ordinary meeting, convened after a clash between the government and the opposition in March 2007, expressed "solidarity" with Mugabe, and appointed Mbeki as mediator between Zimbabwe's ruling party and the opposition.

Zimbabwe has formidable allies within SADC such as Namibia and Angola, who are likely to veto any unfavourable deal by the SADC initiative.

In the wake of unrest in Harare's townships following the arrest and beating of MDC leaders in March 2007, Angola was reportedly preparing to send in some 2,500 paramilitary police amid fears that Zimbabwe's police force would be unable to suppress the riots.

This was seen as a likely pay back by president Jose dos Santos for Zimbabwe's aid to Luanda to put down renewed attacks by Union for the Total Liberation of Angola (UNITA) in 1999. The trio now forms a formidable part of the SADC brigade launched in August as part of the African Union's Stand-by force (ASF).

The African Union's heads of state bi-annual summits and power Peace and Security Council could tip the balance in Zimbabwe, but ideological and personality divisions have impeded action.

The outrage over Murambatsvina forced AU chairperson Alpha Konare to send an envoy, but Harare sneered at him and snubbed former Mozambican President Joachim Chissano who was appointed to mediate talks with the MDC.

The AU's Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) has successfully tabled reports highly critical of the human rights situation in Zimbabwe but it has been vilified as "the Amnesty International's Commission" and neutered.

The AU's Panel of the Wise made up of five senior Africans devoted to preventing conflicts offers a potentially useful framework for the AU to back the SADC initiative.

Since 2002, the European Union, US and Australia have maintained sanctions — travel bans and asset freezes — on nearly 200 Zimbabwe government officials and their spouses. This is widely viewed in Africa as racially inspired reprisal for land seizure.

The West has ensured the flow of humanitarian aid and insists that its sanctions are "designed to make life less pleasant and profitable for those most responsible for the crisis, without adding to ordinary citizens' suffering". But the sanctions regime and isolation has fostered an international climate dangerously hostile to Zimbabwe's economic recovery.

With the sanctions not working, the West should seriously consider throwing its weight behind SADC's new initiative.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in November in Kampala provides an opportunity to bring Zimbabwe back onto the agenda, although Harare left this club of former British dependencies in 2003.

The Commonwealth Secretariat should consider setting a panel of eminent persons involving prominent Africans and technical experts from other member countries to find ways of supporting the SADC initiative, especially the economic bailout and re-engagement in land reform process.

Now rivalry with China has forced the EU to convene the EU-Africa Summit in Lisbon, Portugal. Even as Gordon Brown threatens to boycott the meeting if President Mugabe attends, Namibia's President Hifikepunye Pohamba and the rest of the SADC leadership have also vowed to stay away if Mugabe is not invited.

This stand-off casts a dark cloud over the summit, which last took place in 2000.

Portugal, now holding the EU presidency, must stay the course regarding its decision to invite Zimbabwe because the event has the potential of reviving the ties between the two continents in ways that can help Zimbabwe.

Also, the SADC initiative would benefit from a nod by the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon. While the UN provides a forum for bridging the Africa-West divide over Zimbabwe, the clamour by Western lobbies like the International Crisis Group for a UN-backed solution are largely unhelpful.

Many Africans view attempts by Britain and its allies to drag into the UN Security Council agenda Zimbabwe's essentially "economic and governance" crisis as a way of reining in Mugabe.

Mugabe's liberation colleagues, such as Namibia's Sam Nujoma and Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda should work with Europe's new leadership – Gordon Brown and France's Nicolas Sarkozy – and other influential global elders to support the SADC mediation to deliver an economic recovery plan and a democratic constitution to ensure a level playing field in the 2008 polls.

Dr Peter Kagwanja is acting executive director and Research director of the Democracy and Governance Programme at the Human Science Research Council in Pretoria and is president of the Africa Policy Institute in Nairobi, Kenya.

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