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Why Mugabe Attracts Africans and repels the West

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As Africa applauds its oldest ruling freedom fighter, Zimbabwe teeters on economic ruin. A seven-year-old game of brinkmanship between Africa and the West, fostered by diametrically opposed responses to Zimbabwe's seizure of land owned by some 4,500 white farmers in 2000, has created an international climate dangerously hostile to efforts to resolve Zimbabwe's dire economic situation: 80 percent unemployment, nearly empty government coffers, collapsed services, an annual inflation rate of 18,000 percent and 4 million people reportedly starving and in need of food aid. President Robert Mugabe's liberation peers like Namibia's Sam Nujoma and Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda should work with Europe's new leadership – Gordon Brown and 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.

WESTERN DIGNITARIES ATTENDING FESTIVITIES TO MARK A DECADE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S democracy on April 27, 2004, were struck mute by the deafening applause that greeted Zimbabwe's president, Robert Mugabe.

"I cannot figure out why he is being applauded when he has destroyed his country," protested Gareth Evans, former Australian foreign minister and president of the Western think tank, the International Crisis Group. Mr.

Mugabe remains both an enigma and a magnet, attracting Africans and repelling the West. He is at the center of a seven-year-old game of brinkmanship between Africa and the West, fostered by diametrically opposed responses to Zimbabwe's seizure of land owned by some 4,500 white farmers in 2000.

Since then, the two sides have looked each other in the eye to see who would blink first. This face-off hovered over the summit of Southern African Development Community (SADC) leaders last month in Lusaka, Zambia, and now haunts the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Uganda this November and the upcoming Euro-Africa summit in Portugal in December.

Mugabe's fall from grace in the eyes of the West is a relatively recent phenomenon in his 27 years in power. Now portrayed as the archetypal bare-fisted dictator, he was hailed by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as "a man I can do business with." And in 1994, Queen Elizabeth bestowed on him an honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath.

What inflamed relations with Britain was the injudicious denial by Tony Blair's Laborites in 1997 of Britain's colonial responsibility for land reform. Clare Short, Britain's secretary of state for international development, wrote 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."

After Britain reneged on its pledge to fund land reform, citing cronyism, Mugabe went ahead with his own land redistribution plans, which pushed Zimbabwe's predominantly agrarian economy down the cliff: 80 percent unemployment, nearly empty government coffers, collapsed services, and an annual inflation rate of 18,000 percent.

In less than seven years, Zimbabwe has witnessed the fastest peace-time economic dip in history since Weimer Germany – plunging one of Africa's strongest economic and regional breadbaskets into a crisis with 4 million people reportedly starving and in need of food aid.

Mugabe may have lost the economic war, but he has won every political battle with the West. As the oldest freedom fighter still in office, he has always drawn the biggest applause in African meetings, including the recent SADC summit. The Africa-West standoff has emboldened him and turned him into a symbol of African resistance, a liberation hero.

Even though foreign humanitarian aid has flowed steadily to the poor in Zimbabwe, the West's asset freezes and travel bans on Mugabe and a hundred of his associates and spouses are seen in some quarters as "racial" retribution for his seizing of white farms and handing them over to black Zimbabweans. But invoking a moral mission, the West insists that its "smart" sanctions have targeted elements of the ruling elite "engaged in actions or policies to undermine Zimbabwe's democratic processes or institutions."

In the aftermath of the Iraq invasion in 2003, Mugabe upped the ante, whipping nationalism to a fever pitch: "Our cause is Africa's cause," he told the fervently pro-Zimbabwe publication, *New Africa*, in May. This has given wing to intense militarization of polity in the government ahead of the 2008 elections to forestall a Western-sponsored "regime change."

In a move aimed at demobilizing the opposition's urban support and nipping in the bud a Ukrainian-style "orange revolution," the Mugabe government ordered "operation Murambatsvina" (Drive Out the Filth) – a draconian clearance of what it termed "illegal shelters" in Harare and other cities – which a United Nations report estimates has destroyed the homes and livelihoods of 700,000 Zimbabweans and negatively affected 2.4 million more.

Apart from the economic cost of Zimbabwe's meltdown on the region, Mugabe's real impact on Africa is ideological. The West has urged South Africa to break rank with states that back Mugabe and to adopt a forceful stance against Harare. At the same time, South Africa's ruling elite fear that, owing to Mugabe's nationalist credentials and popularity, public condemnation of Harare would exacerbate South Africa's internal divisions over President Thabo Mbeki's successor and lead to isolation on the continent.

Pretoria's behind-the-curtains quiet diplomacy talks between Zimbabwe's ruling party and the opposition from 2000 to 2004 yielded a new constitutional draft for Zimbabwe. But the initiative was stillborn because Pretoria lacked the muscle to enforce it. Moreover, in a continent where age matters, the 65-year-old Mr. Mbeki has an uphill task getting octogenarian Mugabe to take him seriously.

Issues of sovereignty 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 own debt in February 2006.

Mugabe's status as elder statesman and anticolonialist hero has ensured unwavering regional support. An extraordinary SADC summit in March 2007 expressed "solidarity" with Mugabe, but appointed Mbeki as mediator between Zimbabwe's ruling party and the opposition. Zambia's president, 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."

SADC's meeting last month resolved to bail Zimbabwe out of its economic woes and endorse Mbeki's mediation, but this enterprise has no breathing chance unless Africa and the West end the face-off.

Moreover, the trial of Liberia's warlord, Charles Taylor, in 2006 for crimes against humanity as part of the West's war on impunity in Africa has removed guarantees for safe retirement, thus diminishing the chance of Mugabe's exiting. He is running in the 2008 elections.

The face-off has fostered an international climate hostile to Zimbabwe's economic recovery. Although Harare exited the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2003, it is important that the CHGOM in November provides an opportunity to bring Zimbabwe back onto its agenda. Portugal, now holding the EU presidency, must stay the course regarding its decision to invite Zimbabwe to the Euro-Africa summit in December. This event provides a window to revive the ties between the two continents in ways that can usefully impact Zimbabwe.

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 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.

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