

Relations among Liberation Movements: SA and Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Since the establishment of Southern Rhodesia as a British colony in 1890, the country has maintained strong political, economic, cultural and military ties with its powerful southern neighbour. In fact, had the results of the referendum on self-government in 1923 gone the other way, Southern Rhodesia would have become the Union of South Africa's fifth province. The outcome of the vote did not however change the mutual dependency between the two countries, which became even greater with the rise of an African nationalism that threatened the survival of the white minority racist regimes in Southern Africa. Rhodesia became South Africa's buffer against 'terrorism' and the front line in the war against the nationalist guerrillas. In the end it was South Africa, the big southern brother, that sacrificed Ian Smith's Rhodesia at the behest of the Western powers after the collapse of the former Portuguese empire had left the flanks of the racist regimes exposed. After Zimbabwe's independence South Africa maintained a dual policy: destabilising its northern neighbour politically, whilst maintaining economic ties. South Africa's primary interest remained the destruction of the African National Congress (ANC) structures in Zimbabwe.

With the ascent to power of the ANC in the wake of the democratic elections in South Africa held in 1994, policy towards Zimbabwe changed. It was driven by domestic political considerations, economic interests and regional power politics, which centred on South Africa's gaining influence within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and controlling SADC's Organ on Politics, Defence and Security (OPDS), the successor of the Front Line States.

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Zimbabwe : The problem and its setting

Zimbabwe did indeed attain political power at the end of a national liberation struggle. But there was no liberation in terms of transforming state institutions to serve the interests of the black majority or in empowering that majority politically, economically, socially and culturally. In particular, no capacity was developed to establish a culture of social justice that would serve all citizens. The only beneficiaries of political power after independence were the black elite connected to the ruling party (Zanu–PF) and the former white settlers, who continued to benefit from pre-independence advantages. This gave rise to the contradictions that have precipitated the current crisis.

Today Zimbabwe is characterised by a political, economic and social crisis engendered by bad governance, years of economic mismanagement and unbridled corruption. With the ruling party no longer in a position to win free and fair elections it has now resorted to violence and electoral fraud. Mugabe's rule can no longer be considered legitimate. Misguided economic policies and a chaotic land redistribution programme have brought the country to its knees. There is a critical shortage of the staple food, maize, which has brought the nation to the brink of starvation. Two-thirds of the country's population is in need of food assistance. There is also a serious shortage of basic commodities such as salt, bread, milk, cooking oil, sugar, beef and essential drugs. The crippling shortage of fuel that has persisted for over three years is slowly bringing commerce and industry to a halt. The unavailability of foreign exchange, runaway inflation of over 200% and the attendant price increases, putting ordinary commodities beyond the reach of many, have wrought havoc on the economy. Social misery and poverty have become ubiquitous, with the majority of Zimbabweans struggling to survive. This economic hardship is exacerbated by a crumbling health and education infrastructure and the depredations caused by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The context of the liberation struggle

Both South Africa and Zimbabwe have a past characterised by racism and the domination of the majority by racist minority regimes. Both of the present-day ruling parties had to rise up against oppression and take up arms to liberate their people. Whilst Africa in general was subjected to colonialism, South Africa and Zimbabwe experienced a special variation that could be termed endogenous colonialism, in the sense that their struggle was directed principally at local white settler minority regimes rather than the colonial powers themselves. It should however be pointed out that their struggles still took place within the general context of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, as the white settler minority regimes

were nothing more than political surrogates perpetuating the colonial and imperial interests of their Western masters. The distinction that the struggle in Zimbabwe and South Africa was principally directed at the white minority settler regimes remains pertinent, as this had bearing on the tactics adopted by the liberation movements in the two countries. For example, it gave rise to the phenomenon of competing nationalisms, that is, white nationalism versus black nationalism. This was not the case in the rest of colonial Africa other than in Namibia.

In Zimbabwe and South Africa, the white minority regimes wanted to retain power in perpetuity without reliance on a mandate from their colonial masters, whilst black nationalists wanted to wrest political control from them. So the two protagonists had one thing in common: the control and retention of political power. In whose service was that political power used? In the case of the white minority it was self-evident. Political power was used to preserve economic power, which ensured the perpetuation of its privileged status. For the black nationalists, political power was to be used to serve the interests of the black majority.

It is noteworthy that the ANC's traditional ally during the liberation struggle was Zapu led by Dr Joshua Nkomo which is now the junior partner in the new look Zanu-PF. It is therefore somewhat of an irony that the ANC government is throwing its full weight behind Robert Mugabe who was hell-bent on decimating Zapu in the early 1980s. Zapu had to accept surrender terms under the guise of national unity. However, Mugabe's Zanu continues to call the shots in Zimbabwe today.

The concept of liberation

The goal of self-determination defined the parameters of the liberation struggles across Africa. The attainment of political power would make possible the transformation of repressive institutions that had been tailored to serve the interest of a white minority into democratic institutions and organs of power that would facilitate the empowerment of the black majority. Control of political power was also meant to foster socio-economic development, which in turn would ensure social justice for the masses.

It is important to note that liberation does not mean, or end with, the control of political power, but begins with the empowerment of the formerly oppressed masses. This empowerment has political, economic, social and cultural dimensions. Political empowerment goes beyond the right to vote, and encompasses political freedom for the individual. It allows each citizen the right to consent (or refusal), participation, consultation and to take the initiative in matters cogent to his or her life and wellbeing. Economic empowerment entails levelling the playing field and equalising economic opportunities for all. This includes creating job

opportunities and making basic necessities affordable to everyone. Social empowerment means acknowledging the human dignity of the formerly underprivileged, and granting them both the means and the capacity to access basic services, comforts and opportunities for advancement. (These were formerly the exclusive preserve of the white minority.) Cultural empowerment does not mean freedom to enter into unequal competition between well-entrenched and established Western values and the historically constrained and adulterated traditional values, but deliberate affirmative action to promote positive African values. This would include supporting traditional religious concepts anchored in humanity and respect for human dignity.

The foregoing represent the values that should form the basis for solidarity between liberation movements. As pointed out earlier, control of political power signifies neither the attainment of the liberation of the masses nor the *raison d'être* of the liberation movement, but only the attainment of the mechanisms of emancipation discussed above. People can never be liberated: they can only be empowered to liberate themselves through the deliberate and conscious exertion of political power on their behalf.

Zimbabwe's crisis is a consequence of a lack of liberation and a failure to empower the black majority. Where then is the common ground between Zanu–PF and the ANC of South Africa? What is the rationale of South Africa's support for Mugabe — liberation values or something else known only to the South African government?

My contention therefore is that post-liberation solidarity should not be based on common historical circumstances, but rather on the fulfilment of the objectives of empowerment and liberation. Anything to the contrary reduces a liberation struggle to a mere contest for power.

Factors underlying Zimbabwe's socio-economic collapse

There are two main factors that caused Zimbabwe's current socio-economic crisis. The first is the commandist policies of Zanu–PF, engendered by its failure to transform itself from a liberation movement, which considered itself a paragon of political virtue and the saviour of the nation, into a democratic political organisation. The second factor is Zanu–PF's preoccupation with consolidating its hold on power at the expense of sound economic management. Of necessity its focus on power gave primacy to loyalty (rewarded by patronage) at the expense of competence and the employment of the requisite expertise in key government positions and enterprises. The party made a virtue out of mediocrity. The logical consequences of such a misguided approach have been mismanagement, corruption, contempt for expertise (which is

considered a luxury) and the suppression of any critical or dissenting voices.

The government's commandist policies and refusal to tolerate dissent were largely responsible for the economic meltdown. The attendant impoverishment of the majority of people inevitably spawned more dissent and opposition to Mugabe's running of the country in general and his handling of the economy in particular. Where channels and means of dialogue are blocked, the inevitable result is conflict and confrontation. The emergence of civic activism and the birth of opposition political parties were a direct consequence of Mugabe's ruinous policies. They were not a contrivance of Western conspiracies, as the world has been made to believe. Mugabe has alleged that plots by the Western powers to destabilise Zimbabwe are behind the vibrant civil society and the independent press in the country. He does not admit responsibility for creating the conditions that gave rise to dissent. Yet it was the unremitting impoverishment of the people and the gap between Zanu-PF's policy pronouncements and the reality of life in Zimbabwe that generated civic activism and a vocal opposition political party.

Zanu-PF's reaction to the deepening crisis was to blame historical imbalances inherited from the colonial period, and economic sabotage from the West. It adopted the double-edged weapon of populist policies on the one hand and violence and repression to subdue dissent on the other. These included its chaotic land grab exercise, the whipping up of racial hatred, the introduction of price controls, the resuscitation of liberation rhetoric, the vilification of dissenting voices and the promotion of anarchy and lawlessness. State institutions such as the police and government structures were subverted to serve narrow partisan interests. Political violence became institutionalised as Zanu-PF's principal election campaign tool, backed up by attacks on the opposition, civil society, the judiciary and the independent press. This informal repression was reinforced by an arsenal of repressive legislation reminiscent of the colonial era. These took the form of the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), the Broadcasting Services Act and the impending Labour Relations Amendment and the Private Voluntary Organisations Acts.

Clearly freedom, democracy, the rule of law and human rights were casualties of such an environment, because they had become stumbling blocks to Mugabe's retention of power. Basic freedoms taken for granted in civilised societies (such as the freedoms of association, expression and assembly and the right to life) were trampled underfoot. Judges, teachers and diplomats were advised by officials that the state could no longer guarantee their personal safety. Predictably this led to popular outcries both at home and abroad, as the government of Zimbabwe is a signatory to the Harare Commonwealth Declaration, the Commonwealth Millbrook

principles, the Cotonou Agreement, the African Union and United Nations charters on human rights. These specifically advocate the upholding of basic freedoms, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. More importantly, Zimbabwe's own constitution is anchored in the same values.

Mugabe's reaction to the criticism was to denigrate these values as Western propaganda designed to destabilise Zimbabwe. He would not accept instruction from the West and their surrogates in Zimbabwe on those values that he had personally brought to Zimbabwe. Instead he appealed to fellow African heads of state, black Americans and the leaders of other developing countries for international support on the basis of pan Africanism and anti-imperialism.

South Africa's foreign policy in Zimbabwe

The fundamental tenets underlying South Africa's policy towards Zimbabwe as presented in the *South Africa Yearbook of 2001/2002* are described as:

- promotion of democracy;
- respect for human rights;
- prevention of conflict;
- peaceful conflict resolution;
- advancement of sustainable development; and
- alleviation of poverty.

In popular Zimbabwean parlance, it does not take a rocket scientist to see a glaring inconsistency between these values and South Africa's policy towards Zimbabwe, which is a complete negation of them. South Africa has lent support to the Mugabe regime through its discredited so-called quiet diplomacy, widely perceived in Zimbabwe to be quiet support. What is the explanation for the disjuncture between the content of South Africa's foreign policy as applied to Zimbabwe, and its form as outlined in the *Yearbook*?

Attempts by South Africa to form a government of national unity in Zimbabwe after the 2002 presidential election were widely perceived to be a tactic to buy time for Mugabe to consolidate his rule. He had clearly stolen the election, and the idea of a national unity government was an attempt to legitimise his rule through the back door. The South African government had described the election result as 'legitimate and reflecting the will of the people of Zimbabwe', despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In fact if the South African government were serious about the government of national unity, they would have consulted other stakeholders in Zimbabwe such as representatives of civil society,

industry and commerce and the churches. Confining their efforts to the two political parties (Zanu–PF and the Movement for Democratic Change) smacked of a deal to prolong Mugabe’s regime by enticing the MDC to accept a slice of the cake of political power.

Zimbabweans are at a loss to understand why President Mbeki supported Mugabe at the Abuja Commonwealth troika meeting in October 2002. However, this was consistent with South Africa’s efforts to shield Mugabe from international criticism. Any public admonition or veiled criticism against Mugabe by South Africa (which has been rare) appears to have been calculated to assuage the international community’s anxieties rather than any attempt to induce Mugabe to change his course. South Africa has both the muscle and the capacity to force Mugabe to alter direction. One cannot help but conclude that it is in South Africa’s economic interests to allow Mugabe to continue on his self-destructive path.

The official justification South Africa offers for its policy towards Zimbabwe is simply a parroting of Mugabe’s defence, and an amplification of Zimbabwe’s own foreign policy objectives. This results in South Africa’s apparent acceptance of the following:

- justifying a lawless, violent, corrupt and chaotic land grab on the grounds that historical imbalances are being redressed;
- claiming that international criticism of human rights abuses in Zimbabwe is the result of a Western conspiracy directed against that country (because human rights abuses in other countries are being ignored);
- denying the existence of a socio-economic crisis of crippling proportions, euphemistically calling its effects ‘problems and difficulties’;
- ignoring political violence and electoral fraud (as in the March 2002 presidential election);
- trivialising anarchy, lawlessness, and attacks on civil society, the opposition, the judiciary and the independent press; and
- overlooking human rights abuses despite overwhelming evidence of state sponsorship of such actions. Parallels of human rights abuses have been drawn to strife-torn countries like Somalia, Sudan, Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone where loss of life and anarchy are more attributable to the civil war and the breakdown in civil order than deliberate state actions as is the case in Zimbabwe.

It is generally assumed that a country’s foreign policy is an extension of its domestic policy. Should that assumption be correct, South Africa’s policy towards Zimbabwe may signal that the government is following Zimbabwe’s course, and that in time South Africa will follow in that country’s footsteps. Alternatively, can the disjuncture between South Africa’s policy on Zimbabwe and the underlying values of the country’s

foreign policy be explained simply in terms of solidarity between former liberation movements and common historical circumstances? By all accounts, South Africa is paying a disproportionate price for its support of Mugabe because its Zimbabwe policy runs against the grain of the letter and spirit of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad). It is apparent that there cannot be any economic revival in Africa unless thoroughgoing democratisation precedes it. Yet what is happening in Zimbabwe is nothing short of the destruction of freedom and democracy. Supporting Mugabe undermines South Africa's credentials to steer the African renaissance.

One cannot help inferring that South Africa's foreign policy actually follows the values described below:

- Race is a significant factor in South Africa's foreign relations.
- Black solidarity and brotherhood take precedence over the preservation of freedom and democracy and respect for human rights, which are expendable. Their violation is reduced to collateral damage in the quest for 'stability' (meaning the retention or consolidation of power).
- The economic collapse of Zimbabwe is detrimental to South Africa only in the short term. Medium- to long-term benefits will accrue in due course through new markets for South African products and the concomitant creation of new jobs in South Africa.
- The influx of Zimbabweans to South Africa is something that the country can cope with in the medium to long term.
- Support for former comrades-in-arms takes precedence over the need to address the impoverishment of the masses.

The South African government should demonstrate that its foreign policy towards Zimbabwe is not driven by the foregoing considerations. At present the lacuna between official policy and what seem to be the operative criteria casts doubt on South Africa's commitment to the values of freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law and social justice.

This in turn raises the question: Was liberation ideology really driven by positive fundamental values? For example, were the liberation movements inspired by the need to overthrow oppression and build a new society that would serve the interests of the disadvantaged majority? Or was the struggle essentially the pursuit of power, devoid of any progressive socio-political content? Was there an intrinsic dissonance between the content and form of the liberation struggle that is becoming apparent only now? Were the liberation movements committed to social transformation, or could the struggle be reduced to a confrontation between black nationalism and white nationalism, with power seen as the prize? These questions are relevant to any discussion of South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

There is a general assumption the world over that South Africa is strategically poised to lead the rest of Africa, on account of its historical circumstances. The expectation is therefore that South Africa can and should play a significant role in shaping the destiny of Africa by reversing the trend towards poverty, underdevelopment, instability and marginalisation from international affairs.

Since the advent of decolonisation, government in most countries in Africa has evolved into ghastly tyrannies, denial of civil liberties, and brutal suppression of dissent. Famine, economic crises, political instability, agricultural decline, deteriorating living standards, capital flight, corruption, runaway inflation and HIV/AIDS are among the persistent threats facing the continent. The challenge for African countries is to reverse these trends through a second liberation. The foreign policy of progressive African countries should therefore be directed towards accomplishing this task. Africa is a continent richly endowed with both human and natural resources, but its international standing fails to reflect these strengths. To redress this anomaly, the foreign policy of progressive countries should be targeted at:

- promoting enlightened leadership in Africa;
- creating a culture of accountability in Africa's leaders;
- empowering the masses so that they can shape their own destinies by participating in free and fair elections and electing leaders on their merits and not their liberation credentials;
- fostering socio-economic development to help people to break free from a life of drudgery, misery and poverty;
- correcting lopsided political priorities;
- eradicating the patronage machinery which is oiled by corruption;
- ending the abuse of power, particularly in the forms of electoral fraud, and the denial of freedom and of basic human rights;
- fostering a climate of political tolerance and pluralism, which will assist economic development; and
- abandoning socio-economic policies that discourage investors.

Any expression of solidarity with the Mugabe regime on account of either his anti-imperialist rhetoric or comradeship based on historical reasons is tantamount to a betrayal of those noble values of freedom, democracy and respect for human rights that were the hallmark of the liberation struggle. Such support undermines efforts at Africa's renewal. The challenge for South Africa is to show Zimbabwe and the world that South Africa represents the more promising future that Zimbabwe should be striving after.