



## **Zimbabwe: The poisoned chalice – facilitating SADC political dialogue**

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There are 10 months left before the crisis in Zimbabwe lurches to new depths, and once again the regional and international community finds itself locked in dispute over whether Zanu(PF) will win a legitimate election. Few doubt that Zanu(PF) will win this election, and Zanu(PF) believes it will win because it has won the support of the people. Most other groups believe that Zanu(PF) will win because the party and the government are doing everything to ensure that it will win. SADC and the rest of Africa are saying very little, presumably because it is rude to comment on a process before it is over.

SADC and any other group that wishes to deal with the crisis in Zimbabwe are in much the same dilemma as the MDC. If they express any criticism of the mediation process (which is "secret" anyhow), they stand a good chance of being rejected as "surrogates" of the West. Informed sources indicate that this is already the tone of the Zanu(PF) submission to the mediators: a litany of demands and pre-conditions that the "surrogates" must obey before any talks can begin. Pre-conditions are the name of the Zanu(PF) game, bolstered by the diplomatic incompetence of SADC!

So what is the SADC dilemma? Quite simply, if they criticize at all they will be rejected - as was the case with the Commonwealth - having declared by so criticizing, their affiliation with the running dogs of Blairite imperialism. Mugabe ran a splendid game in deceiving the Commonwealth that he and Zanu(PF) were serious in all their encounters, and then, when the crunch came, eliminated the Commonwealth from the problem by withdrawing. A narrow definition of sovereignty works wonders in Africa it seems.

However, SADC find themselves in a dilemma wholly of their own making: they have denied bad governance, gross human rights violations, and electoral irregularities in the past, and hence will be unable to find these in the present. Furthermore, having stated the pre-conditions in Dar-es Salaam, they are now trapped by Zanu(PF) re-stating these pre-conditions with endless amplification and insult. Once again Robert Mugabe has manoeuvred Africa into a battleground of his own choosing, but one in which SADC has been derelict in allowing to happen.

This dilemma hinges on Africa's acceptance of a trivial definition of sovereignty, and is built into the Constitutive Act of the AU. War, coups, and genocide are now recognized as the basis for refusing sovereignty, and intervention in the affairs of another state, but not the usurping of power through irregular elections, as was the case with the recent Nigerian election. So SADC can have nothing to say about Zimbabwe heading for another stolen election, apart from pious exhortations to follow the new standards and guidelines of the various African regional and continental bodies. As various spokespersons for the Zimbabwe government have repeatedly pointed out, these do not have any legal force, and, hence, Zimbabwean sovereignty rules supreme!

However, whilst sovereignty is most frequently based on elections, it is not exclusively so. There are situations where the very identity of a state in Africa is under contest. Ethnic and religious divisions, such as exist in Nigeria or the Sudan, can result in contest over the identity of the nation, but this is not the case in Zimbabwe, despite the long-standing problems around the Matabeleland question. For Zimbabwe, as for many other African countries, the question of identity revolves around the validity of elections, where the power of sovereignty lies in demonstrating that the government has the support of the people through the consensus of the voting process.

This consensus is established in two ways. Firstly, it is shown by the clear demonstration that the game was played in a fair manner, with no undue preference for any participant. Secondly, it is shown by the engagement of the citizenry, and by the demonstration that the party that wins has popular endorsement. Here, the greater the involvement of citizens and the larger the turnout, the more confidence we can have in the moral mandate of the winning party to govern. The ANC governs with such a moral mandate through the excellent electoral process and a huge majority of the vote!

The ANC governs with authority because the rules of the game are clear. They are established by consensus over the identity of the state, underpinned by a democratic constitution, and the structures necessary to enforce that constitution. This is not the case in Zimbabwe, as all of SADC understands: the Zimbabwe constitution creates powers in the President that no SADC country would accept or has already rejected. Thus, it is either naïve or down right irresponsible of the SADC Presidents to make statements that endorse such over-weening powers in the manner that they did in Dar-es Salaam. By so doing they have already polluted the potential dialogue and handed President Mbeki a poisoned chalice. How on earth can he attempt to mediate when his colleagues have allowed one side to determine the terrain for discourse?

The closing remarks at Dar-es Salaam have provided a rod for the mediator's back. To endorse the land grab, recognize Robert Mugabe as legitimately elected in 2002, and to demand the withdrawal of sanctions played straight into Mugabe's hands, and has led to deep suspicions about the bona fides of the SADC initiative. It would have been much smarter to have said nothing at all, but these remarks lead immediately to distrust. The land grab has been violent, led to enormous numbers of displaced persons, and all but destroyed the Zimbabwe economy. Robert Mugabe won a disputed election in 2002, repudiated by the EU, the Commonwealth and all Zimbabwean observer groups. The MDC mounted a legal challenge which is still to be completed, which seems of little concern to SADC. And there are no sanctions on Zimbabwe: there has been withdrawal of support and travel bans on selected Zanu(PF) leaders, but Zimbabwe still trades internationally and receives significant humanitarian support from the Western countries.

It is thus the lack of a nuanced approach to Zimbabwe that leads SADC into these very blunt and generalized positions, which then pay straight into Mugabe's hands. Better to support land reform AND repudiate the manner of this reform. Better to acknowledge the dispute over the 2002 elections, and demand that the local Zimbabwean remedy is expedited. Better to acknowledge selective sanctions and commiserate with the lot of the Zimbabwean people for having aid cut due to the poor management of the Zimbabwe economy. Then perhaps there can be dialogue without conditions, but, as all Zimbabweans know, any such statements made by SADC will see Zanu(PF) walking away from the table and calling SADC puppets of the West.

**[Several key analysts and internationally acclaimed experts from Zimbabwe and South Africa will provide key insights and analysis of the situation in the country. These analysts can not be mentioned by name as they live and work in Zimbabwe; with the current levels of repression in Zimbabwe by state agencies it is no longer possible to freely express opinions of the nature that will be presented here. Their names are known to the Africa Interactive editorial team.]**

See also **The Zimbabwe Crisis Platform**

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