

"We are the Democrats:" The Crisis in Zimbabwe and the Death of the NEPAD

By Ian Taylor

Edited by: John Gershman, codirector of Global Affairs Program at the Interhemispheric Resource Center

Editor's Note: This commentary is part of an FPIF series of essays by non-U.S. analysts. See www.fpif.org/outside for more perspectives from Outside the U.S. Please send inquiries about Outside the U.S. submissions to <john@irc-online.org>.

Few events in Africa in recent years have so excited world opinion as has the downward spiral of Zimbabwe under President Robert Mugabe and the years of chaos and terror under his rule. The slide into lawlessness, the wholesale, illegal confiscation of land, the general free-fall of the Zimbabwean economy, and the presidential competition between Mugabe of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Popular Front (ZANU-PF) and Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change, have been the stuff of many editorials and commentaries in all the main newspapers, both in the West and in Africa. At the same time however, the Zimbabwe case has highlighted the perpetual reluctance of African elites to criticize one of their own, particularly in light of African leaders' reactions to what most people saw as fundamentally rigged elections. This point raises profound questions as to the seriousness and credibility of the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

The NEPAD was launched in October 2001 and was a supposed blueprint for Africa's regeneration. The document asserts that "African peoples have begun to demonstrate their refusal to accept poor economic and political leadership. These developments are, however, uneven and inadequate and need to be further expedited." There is, so the NEPAD claims, "a new resolve to deal with conflicts and censure deviation from the [democratic] norm." This springs

from the view that "development is impossible in the absence of true democracy, respect for human rights, peace and good governance." The NEPAD shows, the document claims, that "Africa undertakes to respect the global standards of democracy, which core components include political pluralism, allowing for the existence of several political parties and workers' unions, fair, open, free and democratic elections periodically organized to enable the populace choose their leaders freely." In short, "a democratic Africa will become one of the pillars of world democracy, human rights and tolerance," in partnership with the developed world who have certain "responsibilities and obligations" to support the NEPAD.

Tragically, that the NEPAD only lasted less than six months before its credibility was fatally undermined demonstrates the fickle nature of African elite politics. The much-vaunted desire to alter the "rules of the game" on how the continent interacts with the West, without any real reciprocal change in the behavior of African elites—an absolute precondition if such "partnerships" are ever to be taken seriously—now seems to be a one-way street of demands but no duties on the part of Africa's presidents. To put it bluntly, that will never wash in the global corridors of power and it is naïve of African leaders to think otherwise. Fatigue with Africa's incessant problems is already high and, even though not all of Africa's malaise is of its

own making, the refusal of African leaders to at least try to get their own houses in order further exacerbates such negative attitudes in London, Washington, Paris, etc.

In the case of Zimbabwe, although there were repeated attempts to muddy the water over the real issues in Zimbabwe, particularly with incessant appeals to “the land issue” and a desperate playing of the race card, the real issue was the concerted effort by Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party to retain their hold on political power. That African leaders chose to ignore this and rather seek to cast it as some sort of “neo-imperialist” issue shows, it seems, that even in 2002, bad governance, corruption, violence, and vote-rigging will, in the final analysis, be defended to the hilt by many African presidents. Mugabe’s record on the economy, setting aside the land issue, the Matabeleland massacres, the one-party state, and myriad other markers of his rule, has been lamentable. After twenty years of ZANU-PF control, not only are Zimbabwe’s citizens one-third poorer than they were at independence, but, according to IMF figures, Zimbabwe has gained the dubious distinction of being the world’s fastest-shrinking economy.

Sadly, rather than seeking to contribute positively to change this situation, many African leaders fell into line behind Mugabe—in effect positioning themselves in agreement with the view that there is a malevolent white racist conspiracy to recolonize Zimbabwe and make it back into Rhodesia, led by Britain’s Tony Blair and his “gay gangsters.” Thabo Mbeki, a man who likes to think of himself as some of sort of “philosopher king” went so far as to assert at the Commonwealth meeting in Australia in March 2002 that talk of

ostracizing Mugabe was “inspired by notions of white supremacy” and that such moves were pursued because white political leaders apparently felt uneasy at their “repugnant position imposed by inferior blacks.” This type of extreme language is not the unique preserve of Mbeki. But what is significant, is that it is precisely Mbeki who has been notably active in promoting the NEPAD and the “African Renaissance.” Ironically, it was Mbeki who loudly proclaimed at a conference on the African Renaissance in September 1998 that:

We want to see an African Continent in which the people participate in systems of governance in which they are truly able to determine their destiny and put behind us the notions of democracy and human rights as peculiarly “Western” concepts. Thus would we assume a stance of opposition to dictatorship, whatever form it may assume. Thus ... we say that we must ensure that when elections are held, these must be truly democratic, resulting in governments which the people would accept as being genuinely representative of the will of the people.

Zimbabwe provided a clear test case for such noble sentiments to be measured against and for leaders such as Mbeki to translate rhetoric into action. This is particularly so in the context where the notion that ZANU-PF might be peaceably removed from power through the democratic wishes of the population was rejected out of hand by Mugabe. The government consistently targeted the judiciary, the independent media, and opposition activists for repression and Mugabe himself repeatedly flouted a series of court orders barring the seizure of white-owned farmland by state-backed

thugs. In January 2001 the presses of the opposition-inclined Daily News were bombed and several foreign journalists were expelled from the country. Clearly, “a stance of opposition to dictatorship” was called for. Even more so with the murder of opposition activists openly and repeatedly encouraged from the very top and with vicious racism being deployed by Harare.

All of the above clearly goes against the supposed fundamentals of the NEPAD, which claims to push for Africa’s development and to protect basic human rights and democracy. Africa’s leaders did, momentarily, demonstrate a willingness to act with the September 2001 Abuja Agreement, brokered in Nigeria, which set out the conditions for a peaceful resolution of Zimbabwe’s crisis and a program of land reform that would take place within the rule of law. But Morgan Tsvangirai recognized the problems with such agreements well before the Abuja document was signed, remarking that “you know this is the saddest thing about Africa, all these flowery declarations and all without commitment. There’s no commitment because there is no holding to account ... The declarations are not worth the paper they’re written on. Releasing such paper creates a feel-good atmosphere and, when leaders are reminded of what they have signed, they retreat into the defense of the sovereignty of nations.”

This is the fundamental issue: African leaders will rarely criticize their own. The self-interest of African elites under threat from democracy (linked surreptitiously in their eyes to notion of good governance) should not be played down. Nor should notions of solidarity and resentment at perceived “neo-imperialist” interference

in the affairs of fellow African countries. Many African leaders have highly dubious credentials themselves. Zambia's Levy Mwanawasa came to power through seriously flawed elections; aid donors have virtually given up on Malawi's Bakili Muluzi and his corrupt regime; Tanzania's Benjamin Mkapa ordered a crack-down on opposition activists in Zanzibar, resulting in many deaths etc., ad nauseam. Focussing on the fact that critics of one of their colleagues is the former colonial master neatly allows such leaders to side-step thorny issues such as democracy and accountability. After all, if they allow someone like Mugabe to be ostracized for his behavior, who's next on the list? Better to show a united front and protect all members of the elite club. In addition, many African leaders seem to believe that they are predestined to rule, particularly if they are the head or inheritors of victorious liberation movements. Such thinking regards the country and its people as the rightful "property" of the leader, who can and must never lose power. If Mugabe were to be ousted, this legend would be shattered, setting a precedent for the likes of Dos Santos, Moi, Mbeki, etc.

Ironically, the country that world opinion looked to for solid African leadership over Zimbabwe has fallen short, to put it mildly. South African support for Mugabe undermined any speedy resolution of the problem, as Pretoria's diplomacy was effectively based on a public excusing of Mugabe's human rights record and the playing down or ignoring of any reports to the contrary. Note that a South African observer delegation was amongst the first to proclaim solemnly that the elections were "free and fair," even whilst other observers were saying the exact opposite. Note too that the ANC openly welcomed

Mugabe's victory in the 2000 parliamentary elections as evidence of Zimbabwe's increasing democratic credentials. In a statement, the ANC said, "we congratulate ZANU-PF on their victory as we realize that the election process has underscored the fact that democracy is taking root not only in Zimbabwe but in the sub-region and, indeed, in the whole of Africa." In a joint statement following a meeting between senior members of the ANC and ZANU-PF in 2000, the two parties announced that they had "reached common ground" on resolving Zimbabwe's land crisis, namely that that Britain should unconditionally give the Mugabe government funds for land redistribution. The ANC secretary-general Kgalema Motlanthe, ignoring the £44 million that Britain had contributed to the process of land reform but which had been stopped due to gross mismanagement and corruption, criticized London for "refusing" to fund land redistribution. Motlanthe went on to say that "the ANC does not accept any conditions put on funds by the British government."

Prior to the 2002 elections, Mugabe's position was also considerably strengthened by leaders of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) who gave him their unflinching support at the organization's 20th summit in Windhoek, Namibia in August 2000. President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique led a chorus of statements widely viewed as clear-cut support for Mugabe, saying there had been a tendency on the part of some "big powers" to put a "blanket" over the history of the freedom struggle by "portraying heroes of the freedom struggle as anti-democratic and even dictators. ... We cannot in SADC condone these views. We are the democrats

and we want democracy to work according to the will of our people in each one of our countries." SADC leaders went further and congratulated Mugabe and the "people of Zimbabwe on the manner in which they conducted their parliamentary elections" in June 2000. If Zimbabwe had a problem, they argued, it was that the foreign press had misrepresented Mugabe's policies. "We are disappointed," the leaders continued, "by the partisan and biased manner in which a sector of the international media has misrepresented the land policy of the government of Zimbabwe, which seeks to effect a just and equitable redistribution of land in a situation where one per cent of the population owns over seventy per cent of the best arable land."

Part of the problem appears to be the inability of many African leaders to differentiate between colonial legacies in the region and the survival strategies of corrupt and undemocratic autocrats. When African leaders have shown any concern, it is over the fear that the spillover effect from the Zimbabwe crisis would affect the entire region. In essence, whether a colleague was suppressing democracy, encouraging lawlessness, and openly stimulating racism against southern African citizens was not an issue per se. It only became an issue when such activities impacted negatively on the region's economies. Yet, what African leaders do is crucial. Only strong, clear-headed African leadership can create the right conditions for a constructive process contributing to the rebuilding of Africa and an escape from the developmental impasse it has fallen into. In the case of Zimbabwe, Mugabe has delighted in snubbing extra-African initiatives (thus playing up his Africanist credentials as an African standing up to the colonials), but has tended to be

more receptive to African input. If African leaders had used their leverage more constructively it is possible that the situation in Zimbabwe might not have deteriorated so badly.

Unfortunately, Zimbabwe was in many ways the test case for evaluating the credibility of the NEPAD and a clear opportunity for African leaders to signal that they had changed their ways. It is quite clear that this has not happened and the NEPAD's trustworthiness lies in tatters. In fact, incredibly but not surprisingly, Africa fell over itself in talking up the legitimacy of the elections. An observer team from the AU said the elections were "transparent, credible, free and fair," whilst Nigerian observers in Zimbabwe endorsed Mugabe's victory, saying it had "recorded no incidence that was sufficient to threaten the integrity and outcome of the election." The leaders of Kenya and Tanzania praised ZANU-PF's "deserved victory," and Namibian observers proclaimed that the election was "water tight, without room for rigging." Putting in their two cents worth, the South African observer team blamed the long lines

of voters unable to vote despite waiting many hours on "administrative oversights," drawing audible laughter from journalists and diplomats attending their press conference in Harare. This should not be overly surprising, bearing in mind that one of the South African observers had previously told the *Washington Post* that "I don't want to see Mugabe lose this election. He is still a hero to many of us." For his part, Mbeki stated that South Africa would help Zimbabwe, regardless of the outcome of the presidential election.

If Mbeki and the other proponents of the NEPAD had been serious about encouraging an African Renaissance then surely their response to Mugabe's behavior would have been different and signaled a brave commitment to the NEPAD's principles. But as Tendai Biti, an MDC MP commented on elite-produced initiatives such as the NEPAD, "at the end of the day [they] became nothing but a boy's club of little tin-pot dictators justifying the negative views of the traditional Afro-pessimist ... For as long as Africans do not insist on uniform international standards of

respect for human rights, respect for national coffers, the sacrosanct nature of elections, and a commitment toward the eradication of poverty, then the noble ideas and concepts of African unity will become a pipe dream." The Zimbabwe debacle and the response of African leaders to this simply feeds such pessimism. In a speech to a "Review Workshop" on the NEPAD in January 2002, Mbeki boldly stated that "if we cannot unite through an initiative that can permanently reshape this continent and bring about sustained improvement in the lives of our people, then we would have lost an opportunity that will not arise for some time." The fatal undermining of the NEPAD's credibility by inaction over Zimbabwe has, I think, produced this lost opportunity. It is most disappointing to anyone who holds out hope for Africa's future.

(Dr. Ian Taylor
<tayloric@mopipi.ub.bw> teaches
in the Department of Political &
Administrative Studies at the
University of Botswana.)

The Republican Rule

<http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>

Essays Include:

Robert Cutler
Karen Hansen-Kuhn
Chris Hellman
Neil Hicks
Chris Toensing
Tomas Valasek
Carol Welch
Ian Williams

A First Glance at Bush's Policy Toward Russia
Bush's Trade Policy: The NAFTA Express
What Can We Expect from the Penatagon?
The Bush Administration and Human Rights
Bush's Middle East Policy: Look to His Advisors
George W. Bush and the "Other" Europe
Republican Rule and the IFIs
The United Nations: Beating Around the Bush

And Many Others!

Profiles Include:

Richard Lee Armitage
Paul O'Neill
Richard N. Perle
Colin Powell
Condoleezza Rice
Donald Rumsfeld
George Schultz
Paul Wolfowitz
Ann Veneman
Robert B. Zoellick