

## *The NEPAD, Zimbabwe, and Elites as Obstacles to Change*

By Ian Taylor

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As the fallout from the elections in Zimbabwe began to make itself felt throughout Africa and the international community, John Makumbe, a respected professor of political science at the University of Zimbabwe, remarked that the election was more than about "just Zimbabwe's future. What's at stake here is whether Africa is willing and able to police itself and is able to show the world that it is able to take that step forward to democracy and stability, rather than remain mired in the muck of autocracy and stagnation." The reaction of African elites to the election debacle is well known. In fact, African elites fell over themselves in talking up the legitimacy of the elections. An observer team from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) 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." Daniel arap Moi of Kenya rushed to "convey to your excellency and dear brother congratulations and best wishes on your re-election" whilst Tanzania's Benjamin Mkapa asserted that Mugabe was "a champion of democracy" and "it was up to the people of Zimbabwe to decide who should lead them, and the people of Zimbabwe have now spoken loudly and clearly." For its part, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) "endorse[d] the position taken by the SADC

ministerial task force on Zimbabwe that the elections were substantially free and fair," Bakili Muluzi of Malawi—who currently holds SADC's rotating presidency—was quoted as saying. Putting in their 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. No wonder that one Zimbabwean newspaper stated that the South African "observers" were "next to useless."

Zimbabwe was in many ways the test case for evaluating the credibility of the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (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 questions over the trustworthiness of the document as a real program for change rather than yet another "Declaration" are now very important. Unfortunately, when discussing such issues, accusations of "Afro-pessimism" or even "racism" seem to creep in, not to address the issues at hand, but rather to muddy the waters. It must be a strange mind who thinks defending Mugabe's tyranny is defending Africa's integrity, particularly when (and this is admittedly mere anecdotal evidence), the ordinary person on the street here in Africa seems to have no time for misplaced "solidarity" with some-

one widely regarded as an embarrassment to the continent. As the guest “expert” (a misplaced optimism on the part of the station!) on a one-hour radio talk show in Botswana devoted to discussing Zimbabwe, I was surprised by the depth of denunciation of Mugabe by well over ninety percent of the callers. Those who try and advance the idea that Mugabe is an African hero who enjoys popular (as opposed to elite) support are mistaken—or don’t live in Africa. But be that as it may, the fall-out from the Zimbabwe elections and their impact on the NEPAD needs discussing.

In an earlier article I wrote that the Zimbabwe situation and the reaction by Africa’s elites had caused the “death” of the NEPAD (online at <http://www.fpiif.org/outside/commentary/2002/0203nepad.html>). Now, a few weeks later, it is possible to re-visit this analysis and here I think the definition of “death” needs expounding upon—perhaps a curious task, but bear with me. It does not mean that NEPAD is dead in the water, in the sense that it will now be, post-Zimbabwe, totally ignored as an irrelevancy by the North. Fortunately for Africa, it seems that a number of well-placed Western elites (Tony Blair, Jean Chretien, etc.) are interested in contributing to Africa’s renewal and do see worth in the NEPAD document. Obviously the type of support and more importantly, the developmental philosophy—in particular the more neo-liberal-inspired elements of the document—need interrogation, but it would be wrong to dismiss some Western support for the NEPAD as a mere sham. But then what does “the death of NEPAD” mean? A subtler response towards the NEPAD by the West will likely emerge. In this, lip service to the NEPAD will probably dominate and where Western donors think there is a

genuine chance of some of the initiatives working they will likely support them, but it is highly doubtful that the type of reactions vis-à-vis the NEPAD as witnessed at a wide variety of multilateral fora pre-Zimbabwe elections will be seen again. The acclaim that greeted Thabo Mbeki et al at the G7/8 meeting in Genoa in July 2001, and at the Davos Conference in New York in January 2002 were before the Zimbabwe elections and at a time when, presumably, Western leaders took seriously the words of their guests relating to democracy and governance. Those days are now probably gone and in this sense the acclamatory ambience surrounding the NEPAD is most certainly dead.

In addition, the type of visits to Africa by Tony Blair’s recent trip may be less likely in future. Little more than a month before Zimbabwe’s presidential elections, Blair went on a high-profile tour of four West African countries (Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Sierra Leone). Here he spoke of a “new generation” of African leaders who were committed to reforming the troubled continent, were well aware of their responsibilities, and were committed to developing concrete policy proposals to address the continent’s problems. Unfortunately, Zimbabwe’s crisis provides little evidence to justify Blair’s faith in Africa’s elites (as opposed to Africa’s peoples). Indeed, the reaction of a number of leaders who only weeks before were being cast by Blair as “new” and “responsible” can only reduce the credibility of certain African elites in the eyes of much of the West, at least as the potential architects of a “new” Africa.

Even the eventual agreement to suspend Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth for twelve months

was cloaked in controversy. The decision to suspend Zimbabwe required unanimous agreement among the three members of the panel that included Thabo Mbeki, Olusegun Obasanjo, and Australian Prime Minister John Howard. Walter Kansteiner (U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs) commented that the suspension “had saved the position” of the NEPAD on the agenda at the G-8 summit in June. In this he is correct in that, as pointed out before, the initiative will not be regarded as an irrelevancy. But, nor will it likely remain as high on the agenda as it might once have been and it is perhaps predictable that there may be some back-pedaling on the actual nature of the contribution from key Western states to the project. Certainly, the way in which the two African leaders eventually agreed to the suspension does not exactly inspire confidence in them. Firstly, Mbeki and Obasanjo were obliged to base their ruling on the recommendation of the Commonwealth’s own election observer group and were thus severely constrained by that group’s negative findings. One can only imagine what would have occurred if the two had been granted the space to take into account some of the more exotic “alternative” readings of the elections—such as the South African or the OAU’s. Secondly, the decision took place after three hours of “deliberations” where there was a lot of “pushing and shoving and cajoling and pleading” with ten minute phone calls being made to Mbeki by Blair. Finally, at the announcement of the suspension neither Mbeki nor Obasanjo said anything and left immediately, refusing to answer questions. None of this behavior, I would argue, indicates any real depth of commitment to the NEPAD’s basic premises.

Indeed, the collective response to Zimbabwe's crisis raises a raft of difficult questions about the pivotal position that the NEPAD affords African elites in the regeneration of the continent. The document's commitment to democracy and peace—signed by African elites themselves—has unfavorably contrasted rhetoric with action and even though the NEPAD proclaims that “development is impossible in the absence of true democracy, respect for human rights, peace and good governance” it appears that there is, sadly, little real commitment to these standards. But why should this matter? Surely the NEPAD is an Africa-originated document and should not depend on the vagaries of the West? As the South African Minister of Trade and Industry Alec Erwin angrily said, the West “should not hold the NEPAD hostage because of mistakes in Zimbabwe. If NEPAD is not owned and implemented by Africa it will fail and we cannot be held hostage to the political whims of the G8 or any other groups.”

But here lies the rub: whilst the document may have been written in Africa, it most certainly is not “owned” by Africa and, dependent upon massive injections of aid, it is difficult to see how it can be “implemented” if the West ever decided to pull the plug. This issue is of major relevance as the NEPAD requires an

injection of \$64 billion a year to meet commitments outlined in the document. It is all very well for African elites to try and reject linkages between Zimbabwe and the NEPAD but as one diplomat was quoted in the *South African Mail and Guardian*, it was “unrealistic to expect the developed world to separate NEPAD and the Zimbabwe elections... Zimbabwe—and the African response to it—[was] an acid test of the continent's commitment to democracy.” If—as I believe they have—the elites have failed this test, what if any contingency plans exist for advancing the NEPAD without huge donor support? There is no evidence of any and this returns us to the fundamental issue: if African elites voluntarily commit themselves to certain conditions, and hinge their entire renewal project on a quid pro quo (in essence, we'll behave—you pass us the cash), then these same elites are rather hypocritical to turn around and lament that their agreed conditions are now being held against them.

This of course leads us to the very heart of the matter: what exactly is the NEPAD and who is it for? The attempt to penetrate the shield of sovereignty behind which too many corrupt leaders have hidden for too long holds potential for advancing the interests of the ordinary African, but beyond that the jury is very much

out. Notably, civil society in Africa has been extremely critical of the total non-consultation that went into the drawing up of the document. Whilst Alec Erwin might talk of “ownership” the lack of consultation is eerily reminiscent of that other “vision” dreamt up by one of the very same African leaders: the “African Renaissance” of Thabo Mbeki. Launched with much gusto, it has generally slipped from view as, predictably, it had absolutely no foundations in civil society and beyond the media glare had no real presence. Until a strategy is grounded not in the elites but in the ordinary citizens and is based on basic human needs, then any project for renewal is subject to a wide variety of destabilizing forces, not least when elites seek to duck out from the commitments they themselves have made. To return to John Makumbe, Africa is indeed willing and able to police itself and to show the world its readiness to move towards democracy and stability. Whether the elites are prepared to follow—or indeed allow—their citizens to achieve this remains one of the major questions facing the continent today.

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