

Zimbabwe: Pointers and Policies for the Future

Jean Monnet, the French economist and diplomat and founder of the European Community said of the Treaty of Versailles, 'I did not understand the politics of Versailles, only the economics.' Perhaps the inverse can be said of the South African government's attempts to mediate in the crisis in Zimbabwe. Pretoria has apparently been fixated on the political dimension at the expense of the economic impact on the region.

This update makes eight points regarding Zimbabwe, three of which focus on the nature and implications of the internal situation, the remainder on the policy difficulties and permutations that SA has in dealing with this crisis. The conclusion attempts to portray the most likely scenarios, and provide some idea how South Africa might operate in this context.

Three Zimbabwean home truths

The *first* of the home truths regarding Zimbabwe is that it is clear now, in spite of the international press' initially misleading portrayals to the contrary, that this is not a black and white issue.

The issue is also clearly not solely land. Precisely because Mugabe has handled land redistribution so ineffectually, land can now paradoxically be used as a means of whipping up the 'squatters' or 'land invaders' who are now terrorising the farmers and their workers and destroying the opposition Movement for Democratic Change's (MDC) chances in the rural areas. Rightly or wrongly, President Thabo Mbeki and the South African government are portrayed and thus perceived in Zimbabwe to be backing this.

The reality is the land invasions have been a deliberate political strategy by Mugabe to maintain power and privilege at any cost. The adoption of this strategy is, in turn, a symptom rather than a cause of deeper maladies of economic and political mismanagement and decline in Zimbabwe.

At independence in 1980, the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) Party inherited a relatively advanced economy. By 1998, it was ranked 20 of 23 countries on the World Economic Forum's African competitive index. Between 1990-97, it suffered a 0.7% decline in per capita income. Today inflation is running at 60% (at least), hitting poorer Zimbabweans hardest.

We can argue why this has happened. Patrick Bond, for example, has put forward an argument that Zimbabwe's current situation is the result of IMF and World Bank lending and structural adjustment policies which have 'worsen[ed] inequality, stagnation and vulnerability'. But whatever the arguments, the real challenge to Harare is not land redistribution, but growing unemployment, slackening industrial output, a collapsing tourism sector, a fiscal deficit touching 20%, a struggling mining industry, and now a paralysed agricultural sector.

The press loves a black and white issue which Mugabe has skilfully manipulated into a political crisis so as to deflect attention away from his misrule ahead of Zimbabwe's forthcoming parliamentary election. The racial dimension excites a readership otherwise hardened to scenes of African misery. Paradoxically, the international focus on the white farmers has made it easier for Mugabe to play the race card, and more difficult for South Africa to become embroiled in criticising the Zimbabwean president's actions.

The government has no solution to its economic crisis. The 'solution' has thus been to shore up their political support through a deadly cocktail of repression, violence and illegal action. In doing so, this has served only to undermine and strangle the economy even further.

Thus, *second*, the impact of the current crisis has propelled Zimbabwe from a situation of economic collapse to possibly irreversible decline, particularly in the eyes of the investment community. The index of industrial prices on the Zimbabwe stock market has declined by more than 10% thus far in 2000. Tourism in major hotels has fallen to the point that some of the major resorts have occupancy rates of just 5%.

"Mugabe has to go if Zimbabwe is ever to emerge from this crisis"

In this regard, Mugabe appeared on the cover of both *The Economist* and *Time* magazine this past week under the headlines 'Robert Mugabe threatens more than just Zimbabwe' and 'Robert Mugabe is using chaos to keep his grip on power' respectively.

Whatever the truth behind these stories, who will invest in that country under his leadership now?

There is also the underlying concern that Mugabe has created a situation with the land invasions that he can no longer fully control.

Third, related to the second point, Mugabe has through his actions sounded the death knell of the African renaissance vision, at least in the eyes of the international community. The damage done to South Africa's international relations by the compounding effects of the Aids debacle and the Zimbabwe crisis (which is partly a crisis of SA inaction) cannot be overstated.

Five difficulties for SA foreign policy

South Africa faces five difficulties and reasons in trying more openly to pressure President Mugabe to observe the rule of law.

First, Pretoria has to distance itself from the actions of a leader who is perceived both to be out of control and who cannot, like other autocrats in history, appreciate when matters are slipping outside his control. As one SA business leader has observed, 'A failure to act in Zimbabwe illustrates that foreign policy has a bottom line, in this case the SA economy.' Foreign policy does have an explicit domestic dimension and cost.

The need to shore up investor perceptions of the region is exacerbated by the recent turmoil on global stock markets. This instability, it is felt, will inevitably place more pressure on developing economies with a consequent move to invest in traditional blue-chip rather than new age companies or emerging economies.

The idea behind regional integration is simply that one can sell the concept of a 200 million people market more easily than that of 40 million. While regional integration is, in the words of US Undersecretary of State **Stuart Eisenstat**, a 'prerequisite for getting foreign investment', conversely, an absence of stability in an integrating region has a pernicious dimension.

Second, SA has to act to prevent any further potentially irreversible decline in the Zimbabwe

economy already badly mutilated by Mugabe's visceral mismanagement.

Here there are direct trade, investment and migratory implications for the SA economy which have been well documented. Zimbabwe is SA's largest African trade partner (and eleventh largest overall), receiving R5.36 billion of SA exports in 1998 and sending R1.2 billion in return. Moreover, any further collapse of the Zimbabwe economy would inevitably lead to a further influx of Zimbabwe migrants illegally seeking work 'down South'. About 100,000 illegal Zimbabwean migrants were reportedly deported from SA in 1998. Three-quarters of the illegal migrants rounded up in Hillbrow, Johannesburg in March were from Zimbabwe.

More importantly, there is evidence that Zimbabweans are disproportionately involved in crime in South Africa. Of the dockets currently being investigated for armed robbery in Johannesburg, over half have Zimbabwean involvement.

And of course there are the indirect implications of the negative impression created by the economic implosion of what was seen as one of sub-Saharan Africa's more successful post-colonial states.

"Quiet diplomacy is not working"

Third, President Mbeki needs to head off any possible unconstitutional action by either the military or Mugabe's own cabinet in removing the president from office. There are already signs of a split in the cabinet, with the call by the vice-president, **Joseph Msika**, for the squatters to obey a court order and abandon the farms, earlier being overruled by Mugabe. Any recourse to unconstitutional means, which may be seen by some as the only way to rid Zimbabwe of Mugabe, would only reinforce a negative stereotype of Africa.

Fourth, quiet diplomacy is not working. The Victoria Falls meeting was aimed at securing agreement on three points: getting the land invaders off the farms, restoring law and order, and holding a free-and-fair election. If agreement was reached on each of these issues, then Mugabe has not stuck to his promise.

Fifth, the difficulty that SA has in terms of its relationship with Zimbabwe is exacerbated by the absence of close ties between the leadership of ZANU and the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC was an ally of the 'wrong side' (**Joshua Nkomo's** ZAPU) in the Rhodesian struggle. The sensitivities from that time and lack of consequent understanding of each other's positions has been compounded by the (very) public tensions between Mugabe and Mandela/Mbeki since 1994.

Conclusion: scenarios and policy options

Two issues are clear at this point:

- If the violence continues, ZANU-PF is likely to win the election.
- Mugabe has to go if Zimbabwe is ever to emerge from this crisis.

Two scenarios emerge:

One, that Mugabe clings to power. This is the worst case of all, resulting in a long period of probably irreversible economic decline.

Two, that he is removed from office, either by his erstwhile supporters through possibly unconstitutional means before 2002, or in 2002 through the ballot box.

These scenarios raise, in turn, questions about the policy options facing SA.

It is indeed fortunate in the region that it is Mugabe, the individual, who has become the focus of international concern. That makes a solution much easier. Getting rid of him means that Zimbabwe (and the region) can emerge from the crisis relatively better off than if the entire country and leadership were the focus of international opprobrium.

Put bluntly, this means that 'quiet diplomacy' should be seeking the achievement of the only way out of the situation: facilitating the removal of Mugabe from power by political means, preferably with his consent and partly through the creation of an honourable exit strategy. Not-so-quiet diplomacy should be publicly critical of the breakdown of the rule of law and observation of basic human rights – without which SA is seen as little better than Zimbabwe by the international community and, arguably, the rule of law possibly subject to similar 'interpretation' by South Africans.

Pretoria is understandably fearful of being portrayed as meddling in Zimbabwe's internal affairs (and even being seen as a supporter of the opposition). Whatever the deals cobbled together by SADC to save face for Mugabe, the international business community is unlikely to invest in Zimbabwe so long as he remains at the apex of the political scene. At the

same time, investment perceptions of the region are also damaged by an apparent unwillingness by SADC to cast him adrift.

It is important to acknowledge in this that there has been a fragmentation of SA opinion in attitudes towards Zimbabwe. Instead of the President leading and business and others following, we now have a situation where business (headed by SACOB) and government appear to be pursuing different and possibly conflicting strategies and sending different messages. By not speaking out against Mugabe, President Mbeki has polarised opinion in SA along racial and business–government lines. Mbeki's conduct over Zimbabwe may well be undermining the belief of white South Africans in the non-racial basis of their democracy.

President Mbeki has thus to address the Zimbabwe issue in the context of South African values of democracy and human rights – that is, to be more critical of Mugabe's policies and in doing so to place critical distance between Pretoria and Harare in the eyes of the international community. After all, in an age when humanitarian intervention is fast becoming an acceptable norm and the SA government was critical of NATO action in Kosovo on the basis that it represented a double standard towards intervention, there is little ground for crying non-interference in sovereign affairs on this occasion.

The American democrat Eugene McCarthy once said that: 'Being in politics is like being a football coach. You have to be smart enough to understand the game, and dumb enough to think that it's important.'

In Zimbabwe, Mugabe fully understands that repression and the land issue are the only means available to hang on to power. Yet these strategies are consuming his country along with the Southern African region. As *The Economist* noted in a recent editorial, 'Zimbabwe needs the rule of law, an unfettered opposition and free elections. If it does not get them, and Mr Mbeki stays mute, the inevitable conclusion is that they are at risk in South Africa – a dreadful prospect for the last, best hope in a strife-torn continent.'