British threats follow Mugabe's re-election in Zimbabwe

Ann Talbot
18 March 2002

Zimbabwe faces the threat of further punishment from the British government after Robert Mugabe won a third term in the presidential elections that took place on 9-11 March.

UK Foreign Minister Jack Straw told Parliament that the government did not accept the legitimacy of the election and would "oppose any access by Zimbabwe to international financial resources until a more representative government is in place."

His words echoed Prime Minister Tony Blair's earlier refusal to accept any result but a win for the opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Blair demanded that the Commonwealth suspend Zimbabwe even before the election took place.

Straw said that he would press for Zimbabwe's suspension when the Commonwealth election observers presented their report. While, in itself, suspension from the Commonwealth will have little material impact on Zimbabwe, it has become an important test of Britain's ability to lay down the law to its former colonies.

Initially the Commonwealth observers expressed their satisfaction at the conduct of the election. However, their official report, issued the day after Straw's statement, claimed that the Zimbabwean election "did not adequately allow for a free expression of will by the electors."

Despite this unexplained about turn in their assessment, the criticisms that the observers list are comparatively modest. According to the report, "the actual polling and counting processes were peaceful and the secrecy of the ballot was assured." The observers were "impressed by the professionalism and conscientiousness of the majority of polling staff."

Though Mugabe made strenuous efforts to rig the election, Britain and other Western countries have overlooked far greater infringements of democratic principles when it suits them. By way of illustration, the democratic credentials of the Commonwealth team itself were highly questionable. Team leader General Abdulsalami Abubakar is a former military dictator of Nigeria. Abubakar ruled Nigeria from June 1998 until February 1999, during which he kept his rival Abiola in prison until he died—reportedly of a heart attack. However, his key quality as far as Blair is concerned is that he has an impeccable record of defending big business in Africa. He was responsible for shooting down dozens of Ijaw youths who protested against the oil companies' exploitation of the Delta region.

To suggest that Abubakar is the ideal person to assess the democratic character of an election would be a bad joke if the future of the 11 million inhabitants of Zimbabwe did not depend on it.

For his part, US President George W. Bush did not let his own lack of democratic legitimacy deter him from condemning the Zimbabwean elections. The man who stole the US presidency declared, "We do not recognise the outcome of this election." He warned, "We are dealing with our friends to figure out how to deal with this flawed election." The UK government is working closely with the Bush administration, according to Straw's statement in the Commons.

It is expected their response will almost certainly include further financial sanctions directed against Mugabe and his close associates, but may also go further. Britain has already discussed military intervention with Nigeria. The invasion of Sierra Leone has demonstrated Britain's willingness to use direct military force to re-impose colonial rule in Africa.

Zimbabwe is a tougher proposition than Sierra Leone, however. Britain may thus prefer covert operations— the presence of Brian Donnelly as British High Commissioner points to such a possibility. Donnelly was British Ambassador in Serbia when Slobadan Milosevic was ousted in what appeared to be a popular uprising, but more closely resembled a coup engineered by sections of the police and military.

In preparation for just such an action, the British press has been running a hysterical campaign against Mugabe that has had clear racist undertones. While this might be expected from right-wing papers such as the *Telegraph*, which is close to the white settlers in *Zimbabwe*, even the liberal *Guardian* carried a cartoon depicting Mugabe as a gorilla.

In an event without precedent, journalists at the *BBC World Service* let it be known that they had complained to BBC management about the biased coverage of the corporation's domestic coverage of the election. They feared that their own reputations could be harmed, because the BBC's support for Tsvangirai and the MDC had become so blatant.

The degree of unanimity in the mass media indicates that the outcome of the election was central to the interests of the British ruling class. A measure of its significance was the appearance of Tory grandee Lord Carrington on BBC radio's flagship *Today* programme. Carrington was Foreign Secretary under Thatcher, and negotiated the Lancaster House settlement in 1980 that granted formal independence to what was then the colony of Southern Rhodesia. His appearance was a warning to Mugabe that he is not simply dealing with the politically lightweight Blair.

Not only did Carrington condemn the election result, but he also questioned the continued validity of the Commonwealth. He was not speaking simply for himself.

Through Prince Charles, the Queen let it be known that if the Commonwealth would not stand up for liberal democracy and human rights then it deserved to be treated with international contempt. It was, he said, "drinking in the last chance saloon."

The message from the heir to the throne signals that the British ruling class is in the process of changing its relationship with its former colonies. Faced with the threat of revolutionary upsurge in the colonial world following the end of the Second World War, Britain was forced to grant a certain degree of independence to its former colonies. The Commonwealth became the symbol of this new relationship. The elite layers to which Britain handed over state power were provided with a share in the exploitation of the colonial masses by the Western powers and corporations, as well as a place in the world political spotlight. The British monarch, with whom they so loved to be photographed, has now made it clear that they cannot expect to continue with their own privileged position if they refuse to obey her government's peremptory orders.

It is a warning that will not be lost on either Nigeria or South Africa,

© World Socialist Web Site

which together with Australia make up the Commonwealth committee that is to decide on Zimbabwe's suspension.

Nigeria and South Africa refused to accept Zimbabwe's suspension from Commonwealth membership before the election, while Australia supported Britain in demanding immediate suspension. The media has largely presented this as a black/white split over the question of democracy.

Thabo Mbeki drew attention to this in his weekly on-line letter on the ANC's website. He condemned the tendency to identify black Africans with undemocratic practices as racist. "Those inspired by notions of white supremacy," he said, "are free to depart if they feel that membership of the association reduces them to a repugnant position imposed by inferior blacks."

Mbeki's tough talk is belied by his actions, however. Behind the scenes, he is attempting to negotiate a power-sharing agreement between Mugabe and the MDC. He has sent his deputy, Jacob Zuma, to Harare to persuade Mugabe to form a government of national unity. General Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, who has already tried unsuccessfully to negotiate Mugabe's retirement, is also urging him to accept the plan.

Along with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, Mbeki and Obasanjo were responsible for drafting the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad). Backed by the IMF, World Bank and G8, Nepad commits African leaders to Western-dictated policies in return for investment.

The debt-relief charity Jubilee 2000 is highly critical of the plan. According to its South African secretary-general, George Dor, Nepad depends on "northern endorsement."

"The World Bank and IMF leverage is very direct and odious in that countries are so entrenched in debt they have to get new loans to repay that debt and meet certain conditions in terms of cutting social expenditure and the like." According to Dor, "That's hands-on interference in economies of countries in the south. With something like Nepad it's a little more complex than that, the leverage is more on the basis of the way in which Mbeki and other African leaders have chosen to run their economies. "It is a policy of cutting down on the public sector and what government can do, and relying instead on the private sector for growth and foreign direct investment to boost that growth. They've effectively handed the large governments of the north the leverage to start to manipulate [African countries] according to their needs."

Nepad shows the inability of the national bourgeois regimes to oppose imperialist domination of Africa. After decades of struggle in which thousands died across southern Africa, Mbeki is offering the imperialists the freedom to do as they wish in Africa. And the political perspective of Mugabe, who in an earlier period led the struggle to liberate Zimbabwe for twenty years, and who has told his supporters that he is leading another "chimurenga" or war of liberation, is not fundamentally different from that of Mbeki. Inside Zimbabwe, Mugabe implemented IMF policies for as long as he could do so without destabilising his own position.

It was his refusal to carry out policies of economic restructuring and austerity measures with sufficient vigour that led to his recasting by Britain as a bloody tyrant, rather than a respected elder statesman. Until that point, the British ruling class and its media were happy to turn a blind eye to measures carried out by his regime to suppress internal dissent far more ruthless than anything that has happened in the past months.

The major powers and financial institutions pulled the plug on Zimbabwe's economy and began to channel funds into the MDC as a potential replacement regime that would be more pliant and reliable. Its programme was drawn up in consultation with various Western think tanks and the wealthy white landowners. It promises only "change" to the black urban working class facing desperate economic conditions, and sick of Mugabe's corrupt regime—while assuring their big business backers that their watchword would be pro-market economic liberalisation and the preservation of the integrity of the big landed estates.

Mugabe's attack on the wealthy white farmers, after years in which he acted as the guardian of their interests and opposed serious land reforms, and his utilisation of demagogic anti-imperialist rhetoric was a last desperate attempt to preserve his regime. His aim was to strengthen his own hand against the challenge to his rule mounted by Britain, and to prove to them once more that he was the man they should continue to deal with, rather than Tsvangirai.

The ZANU-PF leader succeeded in maintaining his grip on the countryside, limiting the MDC's vote to their urban strongholds through a combination of numerous electoral abuses, the intimidation of both his opponents and supporters and—a further factor scarcely discussed in the media—a certain success with his rhetorical attacks on Britain, the white farmers and their stooges in the MDC. Hence the ferocity of the British establishment's reaction to the election result and the media hysteria that has followed.

The situation in Zimbabwe in the aftermath of the election is highly charged. Immediately after the result was declared, Professor Welshman Ncube, the MDC's secretary-general, was found fleeing across the border to Botswana. Tsvangirai has left his home and taken up residence in the exclusive Meikles Hotel in Harare surrounded by British and American bodyguards.

Police broke up a meeting called to discuss a general strike to protest the rigged election by the Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions (ZCTU), which backs the MDC. ZCTU congress president, Lovemore Matombo, responded to the police action by warning that such was the anger among workers, there could be a social explosion. "The situation is changing from bad to worse," he complained. "Now the workers of the country can no longer assemble freely. They are being beaten up by [Zanu-PF] youths for their politics and the police let it happen. The violence against them is increasing."

Somewhat candidly, he admitted that the real purpose of their meeting was "...to try and contain the anger, to direct it and control it." Now that the regime had prevented the trade union bureaucrats from directing the workers' anger into safe channels of protest, he warned, "anything could happen."

General-secretary Wellington Chibebe said that the ZCTU's response would "most likely be mass action", but he made clear that he did not want people out on the streets. We "want people to stay at home knowing the likely reaction from the government," he explained.

Civil rights groups and churches are also discussing action. Brian Kagoro, speaking for the Crisis in Zimbabwe Committee, warned that the government was "spoiling for a fight" and that it would not hesitate to use "deadly force." Rather than seeing the violent suppression of democratic rights as a matter of principle, however, Kagoro conceded, "Ultimately the matter will have to be negotiated."

The MDC also sees the way forward as cutting a deal with sections of the Mugabe's Zanu-PF, having reportedly approached General Perence Shiri to come over to their side.

Shiri was responsible for massacring thousands of peasants in Matabeleland during a government crackdown in the 1980s. The attempt to include him in an MDC/Zanu-PF alliance indicates that the MDC are more afraid of their own supporters than they are of the regime. It is striking that although Tsvangirai claims to have up to 70 per cent of the population behind him he has not attempted to mobilise mass opposition to Mugabe. Instead, he and those around him have done everything to calm popular anger.

Mugabe shows a similar reluctance to call on the mass support he claims to have, which itself indicates the extent of the rigging of the vote that took place. If he had the level of support the poll purports to have revealed, he would be in a position to mobilise mass resistance to the British attempt to manipulate the outcome of the election. Instead,

© World Socialist Web Site

Mugabe is suppressing all demonstrations. Even some of his own supporters were dispersed with tear gas when they came out on to the street to celebrate the election victory.

At a time when the British government is attempting to regain direct control over Zimbabwe, Mugabe is preparing his army not to resist invasion but to suppress the population. The Zimbabwean army is currently being trained in crowd control, with canisters of tear gas being dropped from planes. Even if Mugabe did attempt to mobilise his rural support, he would direct it against the urban working class, which his propaganda identifies directly with the MDC and, through it, with the imperialist powers.

Nevertheless, in raising the land question for his own immediate political ends Mugabe has risked igniting one of the most explosive issues in southern Africa. European settlement deprived millions of Africans of their land. Millions more were left scratching an existence on poor quality land. This inequitable distribution is still a live issue in both Zimbabwe and South Africa. Like Mbeki, Obasanjo and the other African leaders, Mugabe is sitting on a volcano as opposition grows to the reckless manner in which Britain is asserting its imperial claims in Africa in the wake of the Bush administration's invasion of Afghanistan.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site