

# British Prime Minister Tony Blair declares his hand on Zimbabwe

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Prime Minister Blair has threatened that countries across Africa will suffer the consequences, if Zimbabwe's general election this weekend does not result in a victory for the western-backed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

Adopting the pious tones of a Christian missionary, Blair has declared it to be the aim of his government to save Africa. What this means in practice has now been spelled out. In a thinly veiled threat he told African leaders, "The credibility of my country and investment in my country does not depend on Zimbabwe." By implication he was warning them that Britain could prevent investment going to *their* countries under the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Since the reduction in aid to Africa many governments are looking to this programme as an economic lifeline.

Blair's remarks came at the end of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in Coolumberr, Australia. They were made in response to the refusal of African states to accept his demand that Zimbabwe should be suspended from Commonwealth membership.

In recent months Zimbabwe has become the focus of the UK press with its president, Robert Mugabe, vilified as an African Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden. This press campaign is in keeping with the British government's policy, which has made Zimbabwe the focus of its attention in Africa.

It is true that Mugabe is suppressing the opposition to his regime in a brutal manner. But he has resorted to such measures and worse in the past—during the 1980s the Zimbabwean army carried out massacres of the civilian population in Matabeleland—without exciting so much censure from the British press and government.

The opposition does not allege that Mugabe's repression has been on that scale during the present presidential campaign, or during the previous general election. It is estimated that 107 people have been killed in both elections. A similar number died during the first post-apartheid election in South Africa, which was hailed as a great success.

Compared to other African leaders who received the full support of Britain, such as Mobutu in Zaire, or Idi Amin in Uganda, Mugabe's crimes are on a small scale. His repression is certainly modest compared to the systematic brutalisation of a whole population that took place under his predecessor, the white supremacist Ian Smith. Successive British governments connived with Smith's illegal regime and collaborated with the sanctions breaking that allowed it to continue.

Even in the recent past the present Labour government has turned a blind eye to election irregularities no less grievous than those in Zimbabwe. The latest elections in Tanzania, Malawi, and Nigeria were all marked by violent intimidation of opposition candidates, physical attacks on voters and ballot box stuffing.

Former US President Jimmy Carter who led the international observers during the Nigerian election that brought President Olusegun Obasanjo to power, said there was such a disparity between the number of voters observed and the number of votes cast that it was impossible to know who had won.

Why then is Blair so hostile to Mugabe? One of the key differences between Mugabe's regime and other African rulers that have got away with rigging elections and intimidation is that the latter are implementing IMF Structural Adjustment Programmes, while Mugabe is not. Another significant factor is that influential sections of the British ruling class have never reconciled themselves to the loss of Zimbabwe. The Conservative press still claims an emotional bond with the white settlers, whom they refer to as their "kith and kin."

This curiously archaic phrase obscures the very real economic interests that British businessmen and politicians have in Zimbabwe, both in agriculture and minerals. The British ruling class keeps its heart in its wallet. Their emotional attachment to Zimbabwe is deepened by the fact that their former colony is the prime route for minerals from both Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Added to these substantial points is the not insignificant

factor that Blair sees in Zimbabwe his opportunity to strut on the world stage just like George W. Bush. If the US president can issue threats and ultimatums around the globe, then Blair sees no reason why he should not do the same.

He was furious at the outcome of the Commonwealth Conference, where he was made to look foolish and weak after his attempts to bully the other states failed.

Opposition from African leaders and Malaysia meant that Blair was forced to accept a compromise. South African President Thabo Mbeki, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo and Australian Prime Minister John Howard will decide whether to suspend Zimbabwe only after they receive the Commonwealth observers' report on the election. Since both Mbeki and Obasanjo have opposed suspension in the past, it is probable that they will out-vote Howard, who backed Blair's call for immediate suspension.

Obasanjo has led African efforts to reach a settlement in Zimbabwe. Last year he hosted a conference at which Mugabe and the British government agreed to a planned programme of land redistribution that made provision for compensating displaced white farmers. Recently he arranged for Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the MDC, to be smuggled into Mugabe's house at two o'clock in the morning for a secret meeting. Nigeria proposed that Mugabe should retire, after which he would be allowed to leave the country without Tsvangirai pressing charges for human rights abuse.

The British government is not prepared to accept such a behind-the-scenes deal. Zimbabwean newspapers loyal to the Zanu-PF government have claimed that the UK is planning to oust Mugabe in a coup led by members of the armed forces and police. They claim that this coup will be carried out in the guise of a popular uprising.

The British press has dismissed such suggestions as paranoia, but the theory receives some support from the fact that the British High Commissioner in Harare is Brian Donnelly, former British ambassador to Serbia. Donnelly was in Belgrade when the NATO bombing took place and when Slobodan Milosevic was overthrown in a coup that the Western press portrayed as a popular uprising.

The question of military intervention in Zimbabwe was discussed when Blair visited Nigeria last month. If it was ruled out then, it was only on the grounds of practicality. The British invasion and occupation of Sierra Leone has demonstrated that the Blair government is prepared to reduce African states to a colonial status by military means.

Zimbabwe is too far away, its army too well equipped and the British armed forces too overstretched to make direct military intervention the desirable option. But that would not rule out covert methods.

Blair's attitude towards Zimbabwe is that of a colonial ruler who expects his orders to be followed to the letter. His

increasingly reckless policies threaten to destabilise the entire region.

African rulers such as Obasanjo and Mbeki are acutely aware of this danger. They fear that Blair's naked display of colonial ambitions will provoke mass opposition, in a continent that is already being driven into desperate poverty by crippling IMF measures.

The MDC leaders are also aware of this danger. As the election approaches, Tsvangirai has appealed for a government of national unity in an attempt to enlist the support of Zanu-PF leaders and the army. He knows that if he wins the election he, like Mugabe, will have to resort to repressive measures. Mugabe's policies have only added to a growing economic crisis, the roots of which lie in the opening up of Zimbabwe's economy to the world market.

Mugabe has tried to retreat into national economic autarky, with disastrous results. The UN estimates that half a million people are now going hungry. Even where food is available, hyperinflation has priced it out of the reach of many people.

Tsvangirai does not have any solutions to this crisis. His policy is to accept IMF structural adjustment policies. This would mean the destruction of thousands of jobs in state-run industries and expose small farmers to the full force of the world market. Tsvangirai doubts his ability to control the social tensions that his own policies will unleash. But in accepting the backing of Britain's Labour government, he has made his pact with the devil.

Blair's international ambitions and his ignorance of history, allied to the rapacious desire of the most reactionary sections of the British ruling class to reclaim their colonial territories, are driving Zimbabwe towards a social explosion.



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