

Zimbabwe election used to pressure African leaders

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Britain and the United States have demanded the leaders of African countries condemn the recent presidential elections in Zimbabwe or lose financial aid. Meeting in Abuja, Nigeria this week, leaders from 21 African states are discussing the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), an attempt to win Western investment that will be taken to the G8 economic summit in June.

In a speech by Charles Snyder, US deputy assistant of state for African affairs at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, he said that Zimbabwe had become a test case for "attitudes toward governance" in Africa. He demanded: "If Africa doesn't step up here it's going to cripple our ability to provide the kind of economic development assistance we want to provide—not the humanitarian aid, but serious economic assistance."

Presidents Obasanjo of Nigeria and Mbeki of South Africa were told that the West would abandon NEPAD if they didn't agree to the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth, the group of 54 countries made up of Britain and its former colonies. Britain was unable to get the African leaders to agree to suspension at the Commonwealth meeting earlier this month. Support for Britain against a country that was only liberated from Western-backed white minority rule in 1979 is deeply unpopular in Africa.

That the Zimbabwe election of March 9-11 was made a "test case" and condemned as having been rigged by Britain, the US and other Western governments was not because the intimidation of opponents or the stuffing of ballot boxes was any worse than recent elections in Zambia, Uganda, Zanzibar, Gambia, Benin, Côte D'Ivoire, Mali, Togo and Madagascar—all of which were criticised by election observers. Even the beating up, torture and in some cases murder of supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) would have received no more than diplomatic disapproval if President Robert Mugabe had been the preferred candidate.

The extraordinary attention given by Western politicians and media to Zimbabwe and the demonisation of Mugabe is due to the refusal of his Zanu-PF regime to accept

International Monetary Fund terms—privatisation measures, the slashing of state spending and the introduction of "good governance"—in the last three years or so. Particularly galling to the British establishment has been the orchestrated seizure of land from the tiny minority of wealthy white farmers, many of who retain strong links with British former colonialists. Mugabe has reverted to making "anti-imperialist" speeches recalling the liberation struggle of the 1970s, despite the fact that he embraced free market economics throughout the 1990s and did nothing to challenge the ownership of the best land by the white farmers until the western-backed MDC began gaining popular support.

The MDC was out-manoeuvred by Zanu-PF. Throughout the election campaign its leaders, and its allies in the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), were clearly fearful that a call for strikes and a mobilisation of working class support in the cities against state intimidation would get out of control.

Apart from populist slogans promising "change" that rely on the widespread hatred of Zanu-PF, the MDC is committed to IMF austerity measures and has no programme for the landless poor other than appealing to Britain to compensate wealthy farmers whose land is appropriated.

This reluctance to mount a mass offensive was further demonstrated after the election when the ZCTU called a three-day general strike to protest against state attacks. The strike flopped because it was ill prepared and timed to coincide with the day on which many workers are paid. "We did not do a great job. We admit that," ZCTU leader Lovemore Matombo said.

The Zanu-PF government shares the MDC and ZCTU leaders' fear of a popular uprising. Since the election they have organised attacks by the semi-official war veterans—hired gangs of unemployed youths—on anyone suspected of voting for the MDC. According to Amnesty International more than 1, 400 people, most of them polling agents or civil society election observers, were arrested after the elections.

Whilst Mugabe and Zanu-PF opposed IMF/World Bank measures, unable to accept the impact that reductions in state spending would have on their system of patronage, most other African leaders have decided they have no alternative but to embrace free market policies.

Zimbabwe is being held up as a warning of what will happen if they do not collaborate. Further economic sanctions will now be applied by the US and the European Union, as the economy of the country has all but collapsed. Inflation is running at 120 percent, and hundreds of thousands have lost their jobs as the economy contracted by 7 percent last year.

Zanu-PF's election victory celebrations were followed by announcements on state radio that Zimbabwe would have to import 1.5 million tons of corn over the next 18 months. In what was once a thriving agricultural economy, half a million people face starvation as the World Food Programme resume emergency food distribution following serious drought. Agricultural production has rapidly contracted, disrupted by the land occupations and with no financial assistance available as foreign loans, aid and investment having been withdrawn from the Zanu-PF regime.

Neither has the punishment been confined to Zimbabwe. Crop failures due to drought in neighboring Zambia and Malawi have produced widespread famine, with no relief from the surplus once produced by Zimbabwe. At least 300 people have starved to death in the north of Malawi.

Western financiers determined to make an example of neighboring Zimbabwe have particularly singled out South Africa. The South African currency, the rand, has come under relentless pressure from the markets. As financier George Soros put it: "The elections in Zimbabwe cast doubt on the ability of the African states to create suitable conditions for private investment. Events in Zimbabwe have already had a deleterious effect on private capital flows in the entire region, and after the elections the situation is likely to deteriorate."

Under this threat the NEPAD talks are promising strict adherence to IMF and Western financial demands. This is despite the fact that even the World Bank has admitted that the measures imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions have increased the growth in poverty, disease and unemployment throughout Africa over the last decades. NEPAD will give a commitment to reduce the already miniscule amounts of state spending in Africa and the levels of corruption (tiny in comparison with Western corporations), combined with a pious hope for increased aid, the lifting of trade barriers to African exporters and debt reduction in return.

Mbeki's commitment to NEPAD was clearly the lever

used by Britain and Australia to gain the Commonwealth suspension of Zimbabwe at the London meeting held March 19. Obasanjo, Mbeki and Australian Prime Minister John Howard were the task force delegated by the Commonwealth to consider the report of its election observers. According to press reports, Mbeki was told in no uncertain terms by Britain that it would ditch NEPAD if he failed to support suspension, based on the critical report of the Commonwealth election observers. Immediately after the election South African government observers had declared the elections "legitimate" and South African Deputy President Zuma was widely photographed hugging Mugabe and making a clenched fist freedom fighter's salute.

Mbeki and Obasanjo have organised secret talks with Mugabe and the Zanu-PF leaders, as well as with the leader of the MDC, Morgan Tsvangirai, with a view to establishing a government of national unity. As Zimbabwe is economically dependent on South Africa, the Western powers are demanding that Mbeki puts pressure on Mugabe to accept a deal with the MDC. So far the possibility of Mugabe stepping down and accepting a compromise seems unlikely, especially with the arrest of Tsvangirai and other MDC leaders on treason charges. *Africa Confidential* magazine states, "The likely short term prospect is of drawn-out negotiations between MDC and ZANU, with tempers shortening as the facilitators look on. Zimbabwe's appalling economic predicament will enable outsiders to pressure ZANU for concessions in exchange for assistance."

In British ruling class circles there is no doubt relief that the Commonwealth suspension has gone ahead, otherwise their preferred imperial organisation would have been turned into an international laughing stock. Nevertheless their failure to oust Mugabe by backing the MDC will now step up the demand for a military approach, whether open or covert. Conservative foreign affairs spokesman Michael Ancram demanded, "The time has come for the government to stop talking and start doing." But present extensive British military commitments in Afghanistan and the Balkans make this a difficult option.



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