

Zimbabwe: Britain and South Africa in Mugabe retirement plot

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22 January 2003

An article in a Zimbabwe newspaper reveals a move amongst top leaders to remove President Robert Mugabe in exchange for obtaining economic support from the West.

According to the Zimbabwe *Sunday Mirror*, a paper that supports the ruling Zanu-PF party, a plan is under discussion in which Mugabe is made to retire and replaced by the current Speaker of Parliament Emmerson Mnangagwa, who would hold power for a two-year “transition” period, after which elections would be held. During the two-years, an interim government would be installed with constitutional changes “that would allow Mugabe a dignified exit and would not force elections during the transitional period,” the *Mirror* reports.

The newspaper also states that Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), has accepted the proposal. The British government is also said to be backing the plan, with South Africa acting as intermediary. Britain would pay out £500 million to help “jump start” the collapsed economy, and financial support from the West would be restored.

Both Zanu-PF and South Africa have denied the plan exists, but in an interview with the BBC Tsvangirai admitted that he had been approached in December by a representative of Mnangagwa and the commander of the Zimbabwe armed forces, General Vitalis Zvinavashe. Tsvangirai says he was willing to consider immunity from prosecution for Mugabe in exchange for a return to “normal political activity” that would later lead to “free and fair” elections. According to the *Mirror* however, Tsvangirai only initially agreed to the plan but later backtracked after “a tiny, aggressive white minority” in the MDC objected to immunity for Mugabe. Factions within Zanu-PF are also said to be opposed to the plan partly because Mnangagwa, a ruthless functionary who is said to be Mugabe’s chosen successor, is widely disliked.

Reports in *Africa Confidential*, a magazine close to British intelligence and African business interests, verify the *Mirror*’s accounts. Even before the latter had published its account, which was then taken up by the British press,

Africa Confidential had already commented on a new South African initiative on Zimbabwe. Explaining that Mnangagwa and his business allies attended the recent conference of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and were warmly greeted by President Mbeki, it commented “the bargain would be that President Mugabe agrees to retire within the year, in exchange for Britain lifting sanctions, compensating displaced white farmers and financing agricultural development.”

Whether the plan fails or—more likely—goes ahead in some modified form, the *Mirror*’s revelations expose something of the machinations of the British government in relation to Zimbabwe. Ever since Britain and the West’s preferred option of Tsvangirai winning the presidential elections failed last March, Britain has been attempting to get Mugabe removed. One approach has been through South Africa and other African countries, with US pressure.

At first South Africa and Nigeria arranged for talks between the Zanu-PF regime and the MDC to discuss some form of power sharing, but the government’s intensified persecution of MDC members led to Tsvangirai pulling out. Later last year, according to the *Mirror*, South Africa’s President Mbeki had discussions with Simba Makoni on forming a Zanu-PF alternative to Mugabe. Makoni, a pro-free market economist, was removed from his post as Finance Minister by Mugabe last summer.

The possibility of a more direct intervention, possibly using “covert operations,” cannot be ruled out, although Zimbabwe has a British-trained army and a small airforce that so far have remained loyal to Mugabe. Last November, Mark Bellamy, deputy assistant of state for African affairs, was reported as saying, “We may have to be prepared to take some very intrusive, interventionist measures to ensure aid delivery to Zimbabwe.”

Now it seems that the intense economic pressure on Zimbabwe, led by Britain, and allowing much of the population to face famine and starvation, has paid off, forcing the top Zanu-PF old guard to consider another South African-brokered deal.

The choice of Mnangagwa in the latest plot to remove Mugabe is not accidental. For all the sermonising about Mugabe's suppression of the MDC opposition, Britain is clearly prepared to accept transitional rule by a man who as a former Minister of Security is particularly associated with massacres carried out by the notorious Fifth Brigade in Matebeland in the 1980s. There is no doubt that he would be even more brutal than Mugabe in suppressing opposition amongst workers and peasants. The *Mirror* quotes a source close to the Zanu-PF tops defending Mnangagwa as a replacement for Mugabe as "a strong ruthless person who is not easily manipulated," who is "going to be unpopular because he has to put right a lot of wrong things."

Both Mnangagwa and Zvinavashe have extensive business interests and have been at the centre of the looting of timber, diamonds and other minerals from the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo. In exchange for their military support of the Kinshasa government in the Congo war, Zimbabwe made arrangements for their military top brass to set up a range of lucrative operations.

A transitional regime under Mnangagwa will have to clamp down on the Zanu-PF members and supporters who thought they could benefit from Mugabe's land seizure programme. It is now widely known that far from representing a new agricultural revival heralded by Mugabe, as much as 90 percent of the land taken from the wealthy white farmers is lying fallow. Because of the drastic decline in Zimbabwe's economy the inputs and infrastructure needed by the new small farmers have not been forthcoming. The Commercial Farmers' Union (CFU) representing the small farmers predicts a yield this season that will only be 30 percent of the previous season, itself depressed by the effects of drought and the farm invasions.

Repressive measures will also have to be stepped up to police the urban population. To begin implementing the kind of economic policies necessary for Zimbabwe to mend its relations with the International Monetary Fund and secure Western finance and aid, tens of thousands of public sector jobs will have to be slashed. With unemployment already very high, this would produce widespread opposition. Britain is clearly prepared for Mnangagwa to continue strong arm measures as long as it is behind a veneer of democracy and the MDC leaders are incorporated into the transitional regime.

Zimbabwe's economy, once relatively affluent compared to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, is falling apart, with GDP contracting by 25 percent over the last three years, inflation at 175 percent, and fuel supplies running out. Even General Zvinavashe, whilst denying the reports that Mugabe was to be retired, was forced to accept in a recent interview that "we must admit there is a crisis." Such a statement by a

Zanu-PF leader would previously have been regarded as impermissible.

At present half the population, 6.7 million people, are facing food shortages due to famine. Zanu-PF officials have no doubt attempted to divert food aid to their own members, but the food shortages and the effects of inflation are widespread and are causing discontent among ZANU-PF supporters.

The *Mirror* article admits that the crisis in Zanu-PF ranks and the willingness to mend fences with Britain and the West arise from a fear of mass opposition: "the economic hardships ravaging the weary population threaten to spill over to the political level, thus spelling grim consequences for the government and the country as a whole." On top of this, "Zimbabwe's political elite, who fly to Europe literally on a daily basis in pursuance of their vast business interests, have been terribly hurt by the travel sanctions imposed by Britain."

Beyond brief reports that a deal to remove Mugabe has been discussed, the British government has managed to keep out of the media the details of the bribe it is prepared to pay out for Mugabe to go quietly, as well as the track record of his possible replacement.

All attention for the last month has been focused on the Blair government's pressure on the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) to pull out of the Cricket World Cup that is to be held in Zimbabwe.

It has been known for four years that World Cup fixtures were to be played in Zimbabwe and the English cricket team played a full tour in Zimbabwe in 2001. The British government raised no objections. Last July the ECB asked for a meeting with the British Foreign Office over playing cricket in Zimbabwe and were told there was no problem.

Within the last weeks, however, the Blair government suddenly began actively intervening in cricket affairs. It whipped up a campaign to demand the England team do not play in Zimbabwe, with ministers vying with one another to attack the ECB for its "immorality" in choosing to go ahead with the game. A clearly nervous ECB has argued that it has no choice but to play because pulling out at such a late stage would cost it millions of pounds. Labour's new-found concern for cricketing morals can only be explained as a cynical diversion from its own rapprochement with the Zanu-PF elite.



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