Chapter 8

Case Study: Zimbabwe

David Monyae

Introduction

The most notable feature of recent commentary and analysis on the crisis in Zimbabwe is the widespread sense of optimism, that the removal of President Robert Mugabe and his cronies in Zanu PF will in itself promote and consolidate democracy. In a recent South African daily newspaper article, Paul Moorcraft, the director of the Centre for Foreign Policy Analysis in London, wrote:

I interviewed Mugabe at length for Time magazine when he first returned to the then Salisbury in January 1980. After the dullards in the Rhodesian Front, it was a breath of fresh air to talk to such an intelligent, articulate man. Above all, I believed his sincerity about racial reconciliation. So how did he become a monster?

At the heart of the crisis in Zimbabwe as clearly demonstrated by Paul Moorcraft lies the notion that; to quote from Doh Chull Shin:

The promotion of the democratization process, no longer seen as a result or product of higher levels of modernization, illustrated by its [country’s] wealth, bourgeois class structure, tolerant cultural values, and economic independence from external actors. Instead, it is seen more as a product of strategic interaction and arrangements among

---

1 I would like to thank Dr. John Hinshaw at Lebanon Valley College in the U.S. for his comments and support. He deserve my thanks, even as he is exempt from responsibility for any errors of fact or insufficient political sagacity on my part.

political elites, conscious choices among various types of democratic constitutions, and electoral and party systems.³

There is a rich body of illuminating literature on democracy and democratization. This brief presentation is an attempt to use this literature to enhance our understanding of the erosion of democracy under Mugabe’s Zanu PF government in Zimbabwe. Unlike most countries in Africa, Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980 came about as a result of two competing and conflicting processes. Zimbabweans embarked upon an intense national struggle to liberate themselves from colonial rule. The major question in this struggle was about who governed us. However, the dawn of a new era in 1980 in turn demanded new questions. The central question became: how are we (Zimbabweans) governed? Therefore, the main aim of Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle was largely aimed at instituting democracy by mass popular action.

The liberation of Zimbabwe also invited the intervention of regional and extra-regional players. Although the Zimbabwean question was and remains an African issue, the United States (U.S.) and the European Union (EU) played a significant role at Lancaster House in 1979. It was the Lancaster House agreement that largely twisted the hands of the Zimbabwean political elites to abandon the violent route to independence in favor of a negotiated transition. The Lancaster House agreement produced what was once held as a remarkable win-win solution for the warring parties in Zimbabwe. The country was on its way to a democratic path with a promising transitional constitution. What went wrong in Zimbabwe’s nascent democracy? To what extent therefore has the U.S. and the EU’s intervention in Zimbabwe strengthened or weakened democracy; or the process of democratization; dynamics of democratization or authoritarianism?

This therefore raises further questions about our understanding of democracy. It is perhaps illustrative to pose the question whether democracy can be enforced and sustained by external actors? For instance, Larry Diamond clearly stated in 1992 that, “the global democratic revolution cannot be sustained without a global effort of assistance.” On the other hand, Joan Nelson reminds us that “vigorous

outside intervention to encourage participation and competitive democracy can jeopardize the legitimacy of those reforms.” She goes further to argue against the use of conditionality as a ‘policy medium’ for promoting democracy abroad. These conflicting views about democracy pose enormous challenge to both academics and agents of democratic change in developing countries in Africa. The current Zimbabwe political and economic crisis raises more questions than answers. What role, if any, can external actors, particularly the U.S. and the European Union (EU) can play to arrest the erosion of democracy in Zimbabwe?

**Historical Background: Zimbabwe and the Democratization Debate**

Zimbabwe’s political elites negotiated the transition from the white minority government of Ian Smith to multiracial democracy at Lancaster House in 1979. This negotiated transition was widely held as a win-win solution for both the black majority yearning for political and economical freedom and the privileged white minority. Looking at the political deal reached at Lancaster House in 1979 retrospectively, one tends to agree with Arend Lijphart who wrote in 1991, “The success of democratization depends a great deal on the kind of a democracy that is adopted at the outset.”

Zimbabwe’s transition from the colonial rule to multiracial and multiparty democracy was flawed in a number of ways. Firstly, the political settlement was reached outside of Zimbabwe. In doing so, Zimbabweans were denied the ownership of their peace process. Secondly, the direct pressure applied by Britain to protect the interest of white Zimbabweans produced unintended consequences. For instance, white Zimbabweans’ property was constitutionally guaranteed for the first ten years of independence. Furthermore, they were granted 20 percent of uncontested national seats in parliament. This planted and reinforced the already existing seeds of division and mistrust between the black majority and white minority, instead of unity around nation-building.

---


This was further compounded by three other factors. First, a low intensity conflict, led by some members of the PF Zapu’s military wing, Zipra in the Matabeleland erupted in early 1980s. Second, the existence of the apartheid state right on Zimbabwe’s doorstep facilitated the Zanu-PF’s drift to authoritarianism as it combated a real external threat. Third, the intensity of the Cold War in Southern Africa plunged Samora Machel’s government in Mozambique deep into a brutal civil war with the Renamo rebels. President Mugabe used these perceived threats: domestic, regional, and international environments, to gain moral and legitimate leadership for Zanu PF from 1980 to 1990. Mugabe effectively used state power to present himself and the party as the sole leader of the nation. The transitional constitution was altered in 1987 after the signing of the Unity Accord between Mugabe and his main political rival Joshua Nkomo, leader of PF Zapu. Effectively, Zimbabwe under Mugabe altered the transitional constitution to collapse the powers of both the President and Prime Minister into an Executive President. He attempted to use his executive powers to declare Zimbabwe a one party state. At the regional level, Mugabe gained leadership roles within the SADCC and the OAU. He helped Mozambique fight the apartheid South Africa-sponsored Renamo rebels. Globally, Mugabe assumed the position of a good spokesperson for Africa in the fight against the apartheid regime. As a skillful diplomat, Mugabe successfully led SADCC, OAU, Commonwealth, G77 plus China and NAM in isolating the apartheid South Africa. Regardless of the use of excessive force in Matabeleland, that caused the death of almost twenty thousand people by Mugabe’s North Korean trained 5th brigade, there was no pressure applied to Zimbabwe by either Britain or the U.S. As a matter of fact, Robin Cook stated that:

> There was no word of criticism from any Minister. There was no cut in overseas aid—on contrary; Lady Thatcher increased aid by £10 million at the time of the massacres. No attempt was made to use the Commonwealth against Zimbabwe at the time.\(^6\)

The sudden end of the Cold War and the demise of the apartheid system in South Africa opened new challenges for Mugabe. The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) encouraged by the

---

\(^6\) *Hansard (Commons)*, March 27, 2001, col. 799.
IMF and the World Bank brought tensions between Zanu PF and the trade union, war veterans and university students. When state subsidies were removed from basic commodities and services such as health and education, Zanu PF lost political legitimacy and hegemony over society in the 1990s. Unlike in the 1980s, when Zanu PF maintained high moral leadership and legitimacy, in the 1990s it was only left with state power to maintain control. The more the Zanu PF government failed to satisfy the needs of its people, the more it lost support. Zanu PF also lost support due to corruption. Mugabe responded to the new challenges by closing the political space in the country. The media was intimidated. The other strategy was to co-opt civil society, particularly the war veterans. However, in the mid 1990s Zimbabwe experienced endless strikes led by ZCTU. At the end of the 1990s Mugabe embarked upon a massive payment of war veterans and deployed troops in the DRC. These acts alone further worsened the economy of Zimbabwe. The demand for land provided Zanu PF with the only source of legitimacy in the countryside, where hard-pressed peasants looked for any source of additional land or income. The rest of Zimbabwe’s story after the year 2000 is well-known. The Zanu PF government has maintained political power through the use of violence.

**How Have the U.S. and the EU Responded?**

When the Warsaw Declaration\(^7\) was adopted in June 2000, it was quite clear that President Robert Mugabe’s government was going to collide with the newly founded international norms on democracy. In a recent article, Michel McFaul asserts that “Democracy as an international norm is stronger today than ever, and democracy itself is widely regarded as an ideal system of government. Democracy also has near-universal appeal among people of every ethnic, every religion, and every region of the world.”\(^8\) There has been a mixed reaction to the erosion of democracy in Zimbabwe. The U.S. and the EU reacted randomly, frankly, *inconsistently* which often strengthened Mugabe’s

---

\(^7\) In June 2000, 110 nations adopted the Warsaw Declaration, that defined democracy as “Periodic multiparty elections that are free and fair, respect for fundamental civil and political rights, universal and equal suffrage, an elected parliament, an independent judiciary, a free press, civilian and democratic control of the armed forces, and transparent and accountable government.”

hand instead of encouraging the democratic forces. More specifically, most developed democracies disagreed on the ways, strategies, and tactics to promote democracy. For instance, the U.S. and the EU’s exclusive claims as the sole custodians of democracy have been challenged. There are regional organizations and countries that promote democracy. In Africa, attempts are being made within the African Union (AU) and in the southern African body SADC to promote democratic norms and values. However, this process tends to be slow and not favored or fully supported by the U.S. and the EU.

First, the major reason for the U.S. and the EU’s lack of an effective response to Zimbabwe’s erosion of democracy is the failure to realize that there is no universal blueprint for promoting democracy. It appears that Western powers, particularly the U.S. and Britain, prefer ‘regime change’ as the best way to effect democracy in some targeted countries while a gradualist approach is adopted towards more favored ones. President George Bush emphasized the moral and strategic imperatives for advancing freedom around the world as the key U.S. foreign policy objective in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. The current war in Iraq is a classic example in which a dictator (Saddam Hussein’s regime) was militarily changed in favor of democracy; in Pakistan, however, the gradualist (very gradualist) approach was adopted. However, this noble action towards Iraq and the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) has produced unintended consequences with direct impact on Zimbabwe. It has dug a deep hole within the Western democratic states as they disagree on whether the GWOT is a war at all; is Iraq a front in that effort; and should the international standards such as the Geneva Convention still be maintained. Dictators such as Mugabe have exploited the wide ideological gap between and among Western democracies and the developing countries. The U.S. and Britain’s interventions in Zimbabwe in favor of democracy have been seen as the grand plan to ‘change regimes’ as the case in Iraq. This is seen as a double standard towards ill-favored authoritarian regimes, as with Zimbabwe, versus favored ones (as in Pakistan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia etc).  

Secondly, the current war on terror has been widely perceived to have extensively eroded major democratic principles. The war on terror requires the strengthening of states worldwide. Fighting terrorism has created tensions between liberty and control. For instance, the

---

9 Editor’s note: Author’s emphasis indicated in italics.
current debates over whether governments are infringing liberties in their attempts to control the movement of people, information, and finance. This global development has boosted Zimbabwe’s governmental control over democratic forces. When Mugabe’s political opponents exercise their democratic right to demonstrate, they are often locked up as posing a threat against ‘national security’ broadly defined. The reports about the abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay have further strengthened Mugabe’s regime. What this has done is erode the moral high ground that the U.S. and Britain human rights reports used to enjoy in the developing world. Having said this, it is useful to look at the specific interventions by the U.S. and the EU in Zimbabwe.

The U.S.

The National Summit on Africa held on February 16, 2000, received wide nonpartisan support in the U.S. Much of the U.S. responses to Africa from the question of democracy, HIV/AIDS, and humanitarian assistance were largely informed by the Clinton Administration’s national summit. However, when President Bush won the November 2000 election, the U.S. did not have a clear foreign policy strategy towards Africa, and more specifically, towards Zimbabwe. The general view expressed by the Bush Administration was that the U.S. will strengthen its relationship with key ‘pivotal states’ in Africa. The events of September 11, 2001, brought a sea of change in the U.S. foreign policy towards Africa. It is within this context that Washington’s response to Zimbabwe should and must be understood. It is important to point out that the U.S., compared to Britain, does not have much political and economic interest in Zimbabwe. It has often reacted to the Zimbabwe crisis by following Britain rather than having its own proactive policy. Executive Order 13288 was signed by President Bush on March 7, 2003 which authorized the imposition of targeted sanctions on Mugabe and 76 government officials including the 24 farms they controlled. These sanctions included a travel ban to the U.S. However, these smart sanctions had little impact on the Zanu-PF (although they had devastating consequences for ordinary people, especially urban Zimbabweans). This was followed by the 2004 State Department statement which said:

Should Zimbabwe’s rulers continue to oppress its citizens and resist forthright efforts towards resolving the country’s political crisis, we are prepared to impose additional targeted financial and travel sanctions on those undermining democracy in Zimbabwe.\textsuperscript{10}

The threat to sanction Mugabe and his cronies was indeed realized. In November 2005, President Bush signed a new Executive Order superseding Executive Order 13288. This new Executive Order expanded the net of smart sanctions which included family members of those targeted in Zimbabwe and anyone in the U.S. and the world doing business with those individuals. In the same year, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called Zimbabwe an “Outpost of Tyranny.” Although the U.S. imposed sanctions and carried through a tough diplomatic stance on Zimbabwe, it has not produced any tangible results. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Jendayi Frazer stated that “Neither quiet nor loud diplomacy has worked to keep Mugabe from destroying his country.”\textsuperscript{11} This has led the International Crisis Group (ICG) to support a widely known fact that that the U.S. policy towards Zimbabwe, “suffers from fatigue and a lack of creativity.”\textsuperscript{12}

The EU

The European Union has not applied a sustainable foreign policy approach towards Zimbabwe. There are a number of reasons that can explain this state of affairs. Some members of the EU perceived Zimbabwe’s crisis as one that could have been avoided if Britain (the former colonial power) and Prime Minister Tony Blair in particular had handled the genuine land concerns sensitively. For instance, President Chirac invited Mugabe to the Élysée Palace in an attempt to mediate the land crisis in 2001. The greatest weakness of the EU lies in its colonial past in Africa. Britain led the EU from a position of weakness. As the former colonial power, Britain under Tony Blair, formulated an incoherent foreign policy towards Zimbabwe. The Blair government’s


failure to negotiate with Zimbabwe’s government on the land ques-
tions legitimized Mugabe’s views about the role of race in Zimbabwe. First, Clair Short, a senior cabinet minister stated clearly in a letter to
the Zimbabwean government that the Labor government cannot be held responsible for commitments made by the Tories at Lancaster
House in 1979 and throughout the 1980s. Secondly, Britain failed to realize that Mugabe will exploit its colonial past, especially the racial
dimension of the land question. Britain’s interventions in Zimbabwe were therefore seen by Mugabe and a large African constituency as the
protection of white privilege that began at Lancaster House in 1979. Britain’s attempts to be the bridge between the U.S. and the EU fur-
ther complicated its position towards Zimbabwe. In Blair’s words:

Though Britain will never be the mightiest nation on earth, we
can be pivotal... It means realizing once and for all that Britain
does not choose between being strong with the U.S., or strong
with Europe; it means having confidence that we can be both.
Indeed, that Britain must be both; that we are stronger with
the U.S. because of our strength in Europe; that we are
stronger in Europe because of our strength with the U.S.\textsuperscript{13}

The more Britain supported the U.S. in the invasion of Iraq, the
more some Europeans countries tried to distance themselves from
British-Zimbabwe policy. Although there has been a united European
front against Zimbabwe in the form of sanctions, this has had little
impact on the ground. It appears that Britain depends on the EU to
take decisive leadership against Mugabe when the EU awaits London
to do the same. The only noticeable success carried out by Britain and
the EU against Mugabe’s government has been in the field of public
diplomacy. Britain nonetheless led a successive diplomacy effort
within the Commonwealth to isolate Zimbabwe. However, Britain’s
strategic objectives were met at a very high cost. Firstly, the Zimbab-
wean crisis divided the Commonwealth along racial lines. Secondly,
Britain and the Western countries were effectively left without any
leverage over Harare when Mugabe preempted Zimbabwe’s dismissal
from the body. Zimbabwe’s crisis was therefore left in the hands of
African multilateral structures, SADC and the AU. The other body

\textsuperscript{13}Speech by Prime Minister Tony Blair on Foreign Affairs, December 15, 1998. Available at
http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page1168.asp.
that both the U.S. and EU relied on to exert pressure on Zimbabwe to democratize was the United Nations.

Zimbabwe has been effectively isolated in the Western capitals. But this has invited the intervention of China and other extra-regional players. President Mugabe managed to devise the “Look East policy” which literally meant that China and other Asian economies would collaborate with the Zimbabwean regime in diverse fields. The use of International Financial Institutions (IFI) World Bank and the IMF to pressure Harare were frustrated due to the fact that Mugabe printed more money to pay the country’s debt. He has relied heavily on Chinese investments to cover some of the short term foreign currency shortages. The Chinese are the major investors in Zimbabwe’s economy today. Although the move to rely on Chinese investments does resolve the crisis in Zimbabwe, it has however allowed Mugabe to buy more time in power.

Seymour Martin Lipset once argued that, “Whether democracy succeeds or fails continues to depend significantly on the choices, behaviors, and decisions of political leaders and groups.”

The U.S. and the EU invested undisclosed amounts of resources to aid democratic forces in Zimbabwe. But these efforts have not only been undercut by Mugabe’s autocratic regime but by the opposition politics in Zimbabwe. The biggest opposition party, the MDC appears to be divided into two faction groups each claiming to be the authentic one and claiming the right to the usage of the MDC logo. Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the anti-Senate, commands more support but lacks creative ideas to unite the country against Mugabe and Zanu PF. Instead Tsvangirai appears to be the ideal brave leader to confront Mugabe’s dictatorial rule but incapable of demonstrating an alternative statesmanship posture. He has often allowed himself to be trapped by Mugabe in making compromising political statements. Tsvangirai spent a great deal of time attending ‘treason trials’ hatched by Mugabe instead of building a strong movement across the country.

South Africa as a Regional Power

One of the major mistakes made by the U.S. and the EU was pressuring South Africa’s President Thabo Mbeki to take a hard stance on

---

Zimbabwe. Principally, this was a good move but it failed to realize Pretoria’s own limitations. Firstly, South Africa has worse cases of land inequalities compared to Zimbabwe. Secondly, the legacy of apartheid’s regional destabilization lingers on within the southern African sub-region. For instance, there are numerous calls for South Africa to pay reparations for its destabilization policy during the apartheid era. To expect Pretoria to lead an aggressive foreign policy at a time when South Africa itself was seeking acceptance of its leadership role in Africa, was a naïve move. It is a fact that South Africa tends to succeed lending a leadership role in Africa’s conflict zones where it gets both the African Union and Western powers endorsement. According to President Mbeki, South Africa should “walk on two legs” one in the developed world and the other in the developing world, especially Africa. It is within this context that South Africa’s leadership role in Zimbabwe was weakened because of the lack of consensus between Africans and the developed countries, particularly the U.S. and the EU, on how to resolve the crisis in Harare. In short, South Africa can only achieve tangible democratic dividends in Zimbabwe if the gap between the African constituency and Western democracies is closed.

**What is to be Done?**

There is a need for an urgent foreign policy shift towards Zimbabwe to aid democracy. This can be achieved by finding a common ground between the U.S./EU and African countries. Firstly, more attention should be paid towards strengthening African multilateral institutions to be the main anchors of democracy in Africa. Secondly, the U.S./EU should avoid the temptation of over-emphasizing democracy in Zimbabwe while keeping silent about other African countries without a large population of white propertied class such as Swaziland. That is, maintain equal standards of responses to all affected countries. Thirdly, Britain should recommit itself to the Lancaster House agreements with regards to the land question. Instead of rejecting negotiations with Zanu PF, Britain should pledge tangible resources that could be used to settle the land question in Zimbabwe. This requires the intervention of neutral negotiators from both Western countries and Africans. The current sanctions have contributed to the massive exodus of Zimbabweans to Britain and South Africa. These political and economic refugees have denied the opposition parties in Zimbabwe an effective support base.
Conclusion

In conclusion, the more Zimbabwe is allowed to explode due to diverse views of how it should democratize, the more Mugabe wins. It is therefore imperative for the international community to adopt a common position on Zimbabwe. Lastly, China and Russia, two major global players, have declared their intentions to work with the Zimbabwean government. This has weakened South Africa, the U.S., and the EU in their attempts to pressure Mugabe towards democracy. This requires new and fresh approaches in Washington and Brussels to nag and cajole Zimbabweans towards democracy. Finally, it appears that the U.S. and EU’s interventions in Zimbabwe have weakened MDC quite considerably. There is a need to widen the support net much further from the MDC. There are numerous democratic forces outside the MDC that require assistance to empower their meaningful contribution in the national question. Finally, the GWOT should not be confused with the process of democratization in the developing world. While seeking support for the war on terror, the U.S. and the EU should avoid strengthening the hands of dictators directly and indirectly as the case in Pakistan and Zimbabwe.