

## **THE MUGABE REGIME – TYRANNY ABOUT TO END?**

South African President Thabo Mbeki in a recent State visit to Canada assured Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien that talks were taking place in Zimbabwe between the Mugabe regime and the opposition MDC and that a settlement was likely soon. These comments follow similar confident assurances given by President Mbeki to President George Bush when he visited South Africa in July.

These assertions are not new. President Mbeki first commenced his policy of “quiet diplomacy” in April 2000 following the first brutal murders committed earlier that same month by the Mugabe regime against the opposition in the run up to the 2000 Parliamentary elections. Since then he has repeatedly stated that this policy was the best way of resolving the crisis in Zimbabwe.

The MDC has stated repeatedly since July that whilst there have in the past been a few informal discussions with elements of the Mugabe regime no agreement has been reached. In fact since President Bush’s visit no discussions or talks of any description have taken place. The Mugabe regime itself has issued similar denials about the so-called progress of the talks about talks.

The only person who persistently insists that talks are taking place, that agreement has almost been reached and that a settlement is imminent, is President Mbeki. Whilst one doesn’t wish to question President Mbeki’s good faith one wonders what sort of intelligence he is receiving. What does he know that we don’t know? Has he been advised of something that even the head of our dialogue team, Hon. Professor Welshman Ncube doesn’t know? The South Africans counter these denials from both parties as coyness on their part – in other words part of their negotiating strategy and, accordingly, untrue. So what in fact is happening?

In answering this question it is instructive to draw a comparison between what is taking place in Zimbabwe today and what happened in South Africa after the release of Nelson Mandela and the commencement of the Codesa talks which led to the end of apartheid and the first democratic elections in 1994. Whilst there were major setbacks and a continuation of violent actions, including those perpetrated by a third force, President FW De Klerk did ensure that an environment was created to facilitate discussions. Codesa itself was conducted in a relatively transparent fashion and the general public was at least aware of its existence and what progress was being made. In other words aside from the inevitable doublespeak and setbacks, that are part and parcel of any settlement talks, the world was able to judge from an objective reality that talks were taking place, that all the parties to them were engaged in the process and that they were bearing fruit.

The situation prevailing in Zimbabwe today is a far cry from what happened in South Africa in the early 1990s. Whereas in South Africa attempts were made by the apartheid regime to create a more conducive environment for talks the converse applies in Zimbabwe today and the lie regarding the success of the talks and “quiet diplomacy” is given in the harsh objective reality of the political crack down that has been experienced in Zimbabwe, ironically since Thabo Mbeki became George Bush’s “point man” in July. This harsh objective reality is given in five indicators which show what the Mugabe regime’s true intentions are.

### 1. The August supplementary budget

In August the Zimbabwean Parliament debated a supplementary budget for the 2003 financial year. Most budgets are a clear guide as to the policies which any government is about to implement and this budget is no exception. The budget for the CIO (Zimbabwe’s equivalent of the Stazi) doubled to a total of Z\$ 10 billion. The salary budget for the parent Ministry of the notorious

Youth Brigade (the so called “Green Bombers”, Mugabe’s version of the Hitler Youth) went up from Z\$ 1,2 billion to Z\$ 3,4 billion. To put these increases in context, the total budget for drugs and medical expenses for all of Zimbabwe’s prisoners (conservatively estimated to number 22,000) went up from the original figure of Z\$ 400 million by paltry Z\$ 100 million to Z\$0,5 billion. Put another way the regime is happy to spend billions on institutions that are designed to instill fear in the public but is only prepared to spend approximately Z\$ 23000, or US\$ 4, per prisoner in a prison system ravaged by Aids and overcrowding.

## 2. The new food distribution policy

Largely as a result of the chaotic land and economic policies over half the Zimbabwean population faces starvation. The Mugabe regime has turned this situation to its own benefit as it has used food as a political weapon. The World Food Programme has attempted to negate this policy by insisting that NGOs distribute food donated by foreign governments and institutions. In August the regime issued a new food distribution directive that WFP sourced food must be distributed by government agents. Whilst this caused a flutter in the donor community and a Memorandum of Understanding (that the preexisting system of food distribution by NGOs would continue) being agreed to between the donor community and the regime, the fact remains that the original directive has not been withdrawn. Whether the Memorandum of Agreement or the directive holds sway is not the point. There was never any need for the new directive and its issuance is a clear demonstration of what the regime’s intentions are – it would still like to use food as a weapon.

## 3. Harassment of the MDC and civil society

Immediately after the Bush/Mbeki meeting in early July the MDC made several conciliatory gestures to facilitate negotiations. Its MPs and Morgan Tsvangirai attended the opening of Parliament by Mugabe (having previously boycotted any functions attended by him); it postponed further mass action (having organized two extremely successful nationwide strikes in March and June) and advised that it was prepared to suspend the court challenge to Mugabe’s March 2002 election. Those actions have not been reciprocated by anything other than ongoing harassment of the MDC by the regime. The August Urban Council elections were marred by violence, intimidation, fraud and abuse of the electoral process by the regime. Despite this the MDC still managed to win control of 11 of the 12 municipal councils and controls the five largest cities in the country.

Spurious prosecutions against MDC leaders have continued and new prosecutions commenced. A few weeks ago 3 MDC employees were shot in the MDC headquarters by a ZANU (PF) supporter; as is customary the wounded employees were arrested and the ZANU (PF) culprit has not been prosecuted. On the 18<sup>th</sup> November the entire MDC campaign team for the forthcoming Kadoma Constituency by-election was arrested and the same team denied access to the voters’ roll for the constituency. These are but a sample of the types of harassment the MDC continues to endure. Pro-democracy efforts by civil society are not exempt as demonstrated by the violent suppression of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Union’s peaceful protests by the Police on the 18<sup>th</sup> November. Even the ANC’s tripartite alliance partner, COSATU, recognized the extent of the suppression and threatened to shut down Zimbabwe’s borders with South Africa.

The point is that far from liberalizing the political environment the regime has done the very opposite since July.

## 4. The banning of the Daily News

Presidents Mbeki and Obasanjo have in the past year expressed disquiet regarding legislation designed to silence the press such as the so called “Access to Information” Act (AIPPA) and announced that they had received assurances from the regime that the draconian aspects of the Act would be repealed. Whilst the Act has been amended the draconian measures are still firmly

in place and in September were utilized effectively to ban the only independent daily newspaper, with the highest circulation of all newspapers, the Daily News. This is the only paper the average Zimbabwean can afford.

Excessive force has been employed by the Police to ensure that the Daily News remains closed - computers have been confiscated and senior editorial staff, journalists and directors of the company have been detained. The regime shows no sign of allowing the Daily News to open again, indeed government controlled newspapers have celebrated the "demise" of the Daily News in their columns. Threats have been issued by the regime's Minister of Information, Jonathan Moyo, against the only two remaining independent newspapers, one a weekly and the other a Sunday paper. When the regime's Minister of Justice was asked in Parliament recently by me whether Moyo's comments reflected the regime's policy the retort was that the "law" would have to take its course against these other newspapers, another clear threat and an indication that the regime has no intention of creating an environment conducive to negotiations.

Threats have even now been directed against the Administrative Court Judge, Michael Majuru, who ruled recently that the Daily News was lawfully entitled to operate. All of these measures are designed to ensure that a free press is not allowed to operate in Zimbabwe.

#### 5. The militarization of institutions and society

Whilst in Canada President Mbeki indicated that there was a prospect of a coalition government emerging in Zimbabwe soon. This sentiment is not matched by facts on the ground. On the same day President Mbeki spoke in Canada General Zvinavashe, the Commander of the Armed Forces, announced his intention to retire and to go into some form of "national" position. Speculation is rife that Mugabe's intention is to appoint Zvinavashe as Vice President to replace the late Simon Muzenda. This would be consistent with Mugabe's policy of the past few years to appoint military men to head the Prison service, the Grain Marketing Board, the Electoral Supervisory Commission, secret police and even Provinces - the latter demonstrated by Mugabe's appointment two weeks ago as Governor of Manicaland Province of the officer in charge of the regime's military operations in the Congo. The appointment of this army officer has resulted in hostilities being directed against MDC leaders in Manicaland in the past few days.

All in all there is nothing to indicate that the Mugabe regime has any intention of negotiating a peaceful and democratic solution to Zimbabwe's crisis. On the contrary there is every indication that the regime is digging in.

What many throughout the world do not seem to grasp is that Mugabe is a tyrant and tyrants do not negotiate their way out of power. What also is not appreciated is that Mugabe has very compelling reasons why he fears losing power. Only two groups of people fully know what happened when Mugabe deployed his North Korean trained Fifth Brigade in Matabeleland in January 1983 - the surviving victims and the perpetrators responsible for the massacres of over 20000 people and the torture of tens of thousands of others. Mugabe himself is in the unique position of knowing both what happened (having engineered and directed it in the first place) and of knowing the depth of anger still felt by the victims (routinely reported to him by his intelligence services). Just last week the Supreme Court, increasingly a willing arm of the regime, ruled to suppress the publication of government reports prepared in the early 1980s which detail what happened during this period.

Furthermore few appreciate the extent to which the Mugabe regime has looted the resources of Zimbabwe in the last few years. The leaders of the regime know they simply cannot relinquish power if they are to continue to hide and retain their ill gotten gain. It does not matter what amnesty guarantees the MDC gives Mugabe and those around him who are guilty of crimes against humanity and corruption. They know that there is nothing anyone can do to protect themselves from the wrath of the Zimbabwean public and international law once they lose the safe haven of political power.

Because of this all consuming fear Mugabe himself will not consider resigning unless three conditions are met. Firstly, a broad consensus will have to emerge within the ZANU (PF) leadership regarding a successor to take over from Mugabe as leader of the party. The party is seriously divided on this issue at present and Mugabe knows that if he goes prematurely it could lead to serious internecine strife. Secondly, Mugabe would have to be satisfied that that proposed successor would not sell him down the river ala President Mwanawasa's treatment of former President Chiluba in neighbouring Zambia this year. One of Mugabe's greatest nightmares is the prospect of him being offered up as a sacrificial lamb to appease the international community after losing power. Thirdly, Mugabe would have to be satisfied that this chosen successor is able to win a national Presidential election, in other words that this person would be able to command support nationwide from, at the very least, rank and file ZANU (PF) members.

Mugabe's dilemma is that there is no suitable candidate who meets all three of the criteria. There certainly is no consensus within the ZANU (PF) leadership regarding a successor. Unless ZANU (PF) has played its cards close to its chest well there does not appear to be any resolution to this problem in sight unless General Zvinavashe is viewed as a compromise candidate between the Mnangagwa and Mujuru factions. Zvinavashe and Mnangagwa would be the only candidates that Mugabe would trust not to betray him but both do not command national support. A further complication is that both are also on the UN sanctions list as a result of their nefarious activities in the Congo and as a result would not be able to secure international support and recognition easily, which is vital if the economy is to be turned around. Former Finance Minister Makoni is probably the only leader who would get national and international support but Mugabe would never trust Makoni to keep him out of jail. Until a leader does emerge who satisfies these criteria Mugabe will not budge.

The facts are obvious. The Mugabe regime has paid lip service to negotiations and has no real intention of seeing them through to their logical conclusion. All the regime has done in the last few months is buy time whilst simultaneously tightening its grip on power. In this context it is appalling that some in the international community are seeking to relieve, rather than increase, pressure against the regime.

International pressure against the regime should be increased in the following ways:

1. Existing targeted sanctions against those leaders of the regime responsible for gross human rights abuses and corruption should be maintained, strengthened and broadened. It should be stressed that the MDC is not calling for the imposition of general economic sanctions, and has never done so. It is only the regime's propaganda machine that has put out the lie that the MDC has called for economic sanctions.
2. Those States still giving moral support to the regime should be engaged on a bilateral basis and encouraged to speak out against the human rights abuses taking place in Zimbabwe. In particular world leaders should no longer accept the glib assurances that all is well (which fly in the face of the harsh factual reality of Zimbabwe) made by those who have undertaken to resolve the crisis on behalf of the international community.
3. The Mugabe regime has effectively stemmed the flow of information out of the country by banning foreign journalists and independent local newspapers such as the Daily News. President Obasanjo said on the 17<sup>th</sup> November that one of the purposes of his visit to Zimbabwe was to find out for himself what was happening in the country. Whilst his efforts are greatly appreciated there is no way he could accurately assess what is going on in the country in a whistle stop visit to Harare lasting only a few hours. What is needed is for an eminent persons group to come to Zimbabwe for at least a week. That group will need to travel the country and must have an opportunity to speak to rank and file Zimbabweans, the opposition and civil society groups.

4. The international community should take every opportunity to invite opposition politicians, civic leaders and human rights activists to international fora and other meetings to give them an opportunity to explain to the world just what is happening in Zimbabwe. Once the full enormity of what is going on in Zimbabwe is appreciated internationally more will be motivated to do something constructive to resolve the crisis.
5. Greater attention should be paid to those who being subjected to massive human rights abuses in Zimbabwe. In particular greater international attention should be paid to the plight of people like Morgan Tsvangirai and many other lesser known MDC and civil society activists facing spurious, trumped up charges some of which potentially carry the death penalty.
6. Efforts must be made to raise the Zimbabwean crisis in the United Nations General Assembly. In particular consideration should be given to the application of the Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty given the Mugabe regime's abuse of WFP food aid and the use of food as a political weapon against the Zimbabwean populace. The situation in Zimbabwe cries out for a visit by Secretary General Kofi Annan.
7. International resources should be secured to support civil society groups and human rights NGOs that have been assisting victims of the Mugabe regime and are engaged in non violent democratic opposition to the regime. Likewise resources should be obtained to ensure that a free and fair electoral environment is obtained, for it is only through free and fair elections that legitimacy and stability can be restored to Zimbabwe.

When Presidents Mbeki and Bush held a joint press conference in Pretoria in July they both acknowledged that the Zimbabwean crisis demanded urgent attention. Tragically another four months have been allowed to slip by and if anything the crisis has grown. Zimbabwe has the fastest declining economy in the world. It is experiencing hyper-inflation with rates well over 500% and sharply rising. Three million Zimbabweans have sought refuge in neighbouring States and elsewhere in the last few years. The numbers of refugees pouring out of the country grow daily and are now impacting fledgling, fragile democracies in the region. Aids infection rates are amongst the highest in the world with over one in four people infected. The health system is collapsing as are other social services. Over five million Zimbabweans face starvation in the coming months and there is no short term relief in sight because of the regime's chaotic land and economic policies which will ensure that even if there are good rains this coming rainy season insufficient food will be grown. Life has, in short, become intolerable for the vast majority of Zimbabweans.

The pro-democracy opposition has been accused by some of not being ready to govern. It has been accused of lacking unity and vision. It has been accused of not having a concrete "way forward" out of this crisis once new elections are finally held. It is also accused by its detractors of being a stooge of the West and whites. This criticism and propaganda ignores the factual reality. The MDC, despite operating in one of the most draconian political environments in the world, has almost half the elected seats in Parliament and this year commenced governing 11 of 12 local governments in the country's largest cities. Despite the arrest, torture and detention of virtually every single member of its National Executive and Parliamentary caucus the unity and determination to govern of the MDC has never been stronger. The MDC has spent the whole of 2003 re-crafting its policies to cater for the rapidly changing economic environment caused by the Mugabe regime's disastrous policies and these will be presented to the MDC's membership at a convention in December for ratification. The draft policy document approved at a recent National Executive meeting is impressive.

The opposition has fought a principled non violent campaign to gain power peacefully and constitutionally but its options have been systematically terminated by the regime. These actions of this tyrannical regime will only strengthen the hand of hawks and reduce the chances of a

peaceful resolution to the crisis. If Zimbabwe implodes there will be devastating consequences for the region as a whole and much of the fine work done by African democrats such as President Mbeki will be undone. As difficult as it is for President Mbeki and other influential democratic leaders to deal with a tyrant in their midst the time is now for them to vocalize the principled African Renaissance leadership that all in SADC expect of them.

Time is rapidly running out for Zimbabwe and the international community must act urgently and decisively to avoid a major humanitarian catastrophe.

David Coltart MP  
Bulawayo  
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David Coltart has been a human rights lawyer in Bulawayo for the last 20 years. In 2000 he was elected to Parliament in the Bulawayo South Constituency. He stood against a former ZANU (PF) cabinet minister and won with an 84% majority. He is presently the MDC Shadow Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs.