



South Africa's Involvement in Zimbabwe's Suspension from the Commonwealth of Nations

La participación de Sudáfrica en la suspensión
de Zimbabwe de la Mancomunidad de Naciones

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Abstract

This article delves upon Zimbabwe's 2002 suspension from the Commonwealth of Nations and the relentless efforts of South Africa and other peers to get that suspension lifted, in the context of continuous rebuttals from states such as the UK and Australia. The research piece touches primarily upon the underlying motives for the said suspension, as well as the reasoning behind the bandwagoning of nations on the ongoing issues plaguing Zimbabwe in the early 2000s. Furthermore, it tangentially covers themes such as: the balance within the Commonwealth, global North versus South interpretations of democracy – and the realities they produce, and the rationale of two-sided post-colonial narratives. In our endeavour we have used a series of primary and secondary literary sources. Our conclusion is that South Africa gave primacy to its own foreign policy objectives, and thereby, allowed democracy to continue to disintegrate in Zimbabwe. Our research piece purposefully lacks the classical structure one might expect, for we consider that the chosen style of organizing information best befits the general public and specialized reads alike.

Keywords: international relations, international organizations, (post)colonialism, democracy, diplomacy, foreign policy

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza la suspensión de Zimbabwe de la Mancomunidad Británica de Naciones y los incansables esfuerzos de Sudáfrica y sus socios regionales para levantarla, en el contexto de continuas refutaciones de Estados como el Reino Unido y Australia. Nuestra investigación identifica los motivos subyacentes de la suspensión declarada, así como el razonamiento detrás de la polarización de las naciones sobre la plétora de problemas que plagaron a Zimbabwe a principios de la década de 2000. Además, cubrimos tangencialmente temas como el equilibrio de poder dentro de la Commonwealth, las interpretaciones globales de la democracia entre el Norte y el Sur —y las realidades que producen— y la razón fundamental detrás de las narrativas poscoloniales. En nuestro esfuerzo, hemos utilizado una serie de fuentes literarias primarias y secundarias. Concluimos que Sudáfrica dio primacía a sus propios objetivos de política exterior y, por lo tanto, permitió que la democracia siguiera desintegrándose en Zimbabwe. Lo que está a punto de leer carece deliberadamente de la estructura clásica que cabría esperar, ya que consideramos que el estilo elegido para organizar la información se adapta mejor al público en general y a las lecturas especializadas por igual.

Palabras clave: relaciones internacionales, organizaciones internacionales, (pos)colonialismo, democracia, diplomacia, política exterior

Introduction, disclaimers and some theory

As almost two decades have passed since the first US travel and financial sanctions were imposed on Zimbabwe in an effort to curve Robert Mugabe's descent into authoritarianism, the new White House administration sends no signals of backing down, with President Biden having renewed the sanctions program in March 2021. Since then, what was meant to bring Zimbabwe to the democratic path has failed miserably, with economic and political conditions continuously deteriorating therein. A lengthy body of work dedicated to the failure of sanctions, coupled with Zimbabweans' arguments that sanctions continue to cripple their economy and affect their livelihoods, and reinforced by states'¹ and organizations' calls,² have recently culminated with a UN rapporteur's pleas for lifting sanctions.³

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1. Wang Wenbin, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on November 1, 2021", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, November 1st, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3l6gQRn>.
 2. Lazarus Chakwera, "Statement by His Excellency Dr. Lazarus McCarthy Chakwera, President of the Republic of Malawi, and Chairperson of SADC, Calling for the Lifting of All Sanctions Imposed on The Republic of Zimbabwe", *Southern African Development Community*, October 25th, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3Yz8q2I>.
 3. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Preliminary Findings of the Visit to the Republic of Zimbabwe by the Special Rapporteur on the Negative Impact of Unilateral Coercive Measures on the Enjoyment of Human Rights", *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, document 2063260, October 28th, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3J9lqqb>.

Other nations, either through standalone action or through the use of international organisations - such as the EU and the Commonwealth - have participated, albeit distinctively, to the sanctions regimes imposed on Zimbabwe.

This article provides an account of the inner workings behind the Commonwealth's decision to suspend Zimbabwe's membership in the organisation starting with 2002. Despite not wanting to put a label on this particular piece of research, it could be considered a case study of how regional foreign policy interests end up eclipsing international pleas for democratization inside international organisations.

Our main question is why did South Africa decide to side with Zimbabwe against states from the global North,⁴ despite seeming to be more ideologically connected to the latter rather than the former when it comes to questions of how democracy and democratization should be furthered. To rephrase: why did the government in Pretoria refuse to be the North's footstep in Africa in this particular instance and chose instead to be Sub-Saharan Africa's footstep in the North? Our findings align with most of the literature covering the subject either directly or tangentially - thus the perspective we provide is not new, nor innovative; rather we hope it is a pleasurable dive into several intermingled themes, of which we only exemplify: if sanctions applied by regional organisations are conducive to democracy/democratisation; how the balance of power is achieved inside international governmental bodies, how the use of anti(neo)colonialist discourse can change state preference. The rest of the *motifs* can be identified by readers in the following sections.

It is our firm belief that this article works well without a distinct and elaborate theoretical framework part, thus we have opted to include most theoretical references throughout the body of the text. Nonetheless, some definitions are in order, for scholars and casual readers alike, and they are provided below - with some of them being extended into bits of theory.

As our work heavily focuses on the question of democracy, we can synthesize the term, by drawing from Dahl, as the free and honest contest for political power, inclusive participation and the guarantee of civil and political liberties.⁵ Sartori argues that all the significant contributions to the theory of

4. The word "North" was chosen in detriment of "West" because it aligns with Sub-Saharan discourse regarding the political global system.

5. Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (Yale, US: Yale University Press, 1973).

democracy are only relevant to the particular string of democracy found in the political North.⁶ They are Northern formulations that find themselves limited when trying to describe societies in which the state has but a diminished importance. Nonetheless, we argue that if the North is both the originator of democracy as we know it and its strongest advocate, agreeing with its denouncement of undemocratic practices - which go against basic human rights or free elections, for example - does not constitute a mistake. However, calling a spade a spade, while relevant in a game of cards, becomes a complicated chore when it comes to social sciences. The thorny issue of what constitutes democratic behaviour will be briefly tackled below.

Granted that our topic delves on an attempt to democratize through external influence, it is also invaluable to identify some of the basic traits of exerting influence on foreign actors. States can affect other states' decisions through a handful of political, economic, and military mechanisms. Indeed, the totality of mechanisms is rarely available to one country at a given point in time; nevertheless, more possibilities are often concomitantly at one state's disposal.

Coercion and persuasion represent the two main ways in which states can influence other states in the international arena, at least for the body of scholars of international law. While coercion is a mechanism generally advertised and employed by realists,⁷ liberalism and social constructivism display a preference for persuasion.⁸ Sanctions represent ways of manifesting coercion - whereby international actors raise the benefits of conformity while simultaneously increasing the costs of non-conformity for other actors - and are the least costly item to be found inside the hard power toolkit.⁹ Sanctions are foreign policy tools *par excellence*, aimed at either preventing unwanted behaviours or ensuring their reversal, especially when it comes to security concerns or human rights infringements.

Although coercion can be used in warfare, the purpose of this research piece is to underline its manoeuvring through diplomacy, specifically inside

6. See Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, UK: Chatham House, 1987).

7. See Daniel Drezner, "Introduction: The Interaction of Domestic and International Institutions", in *Locating the Proper Authorities: The Interaction of Domestic and International Institutions*, ed. Daniel Drezner (Ann Arbor, US: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

8. See Alastair Johnston, "Treating International Institutions as Social Environment", *International Studies Quarterly* 45, n.° 4 (2001): 495, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0020-8833.00212>.

9. For more on the distinction between soft and hard power, see Joseph Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

international governmental organisations. International institutions don't reconfigure state interest - nor do they reconfigure preferences, for that fact - but they can change the conduct of targeted states, making the latter realize that it is in their interest to succumb to such changes.¹⁰ This can be done through imposing conditions - in our case conditions needed to be fulfilled by Zimbabwe as to reap the various fruits associated with being a Commonwealth member.¹¹ While conditionality was originally coined to describe sets of criteria to be met to obtain aid from financial institutions, human rights-motivated interventions shortly doubled those focusing on aid. Subsequently, international institutions of several types began to have a more decisive say regarding state behaviour. When their sovereignty was ceded to others, states started to pose sharp questions regarding Northern responsibility and the latter's actors' right to intervene in shaping and implementing domestic policies. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, international policy intervention became a norm and the paradigm has not yet shifted, only evolved. We feel that one clarification is in order: when we speak of international organisations - the Commonwealth included - one must not think of a faceless monolith; in fact, the said entities are pools of states controlling pools of resources. Still, we do not share the view that international institutions represent mere devices available to powerful states "with minimal influence on state behaviour".¹² While we find the above realist account accurate in some instances, it fails to explain others, namely, those institutions inside which bandwagoning allows smaller states to counter the influence of larger ones and steer the institution towards the desired outcome that is discordant with the interests of larger actors. Our paper does not describe how bandwagoning can alter historically created balances of power, but it exposes and dissects an attempt to do so.

Zimbabwe's initial suspension

In 2002, Zimbabwe was suspended from the Commonwealth, after it had been the black sheep of the organization for some time. Talks surrounding Ro-

10. See Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, US: Princeton University Press, 1984).

11. Some of the formal benefits of Commonwealth membership are listed by the organization at <https://bit.ly/3ZUSkID>.

12. John Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions", *International Security* 19, n.º 3 (1994/1995): 7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078>.

bert Mugabe's regime and the dire situation of his country led to many divisive discussions amongst the Commonwealth's members. Standing accused of breaching the Harare Declaration of 1991, a document that underlines the basic principles of the Commonwealth, Zimbabwe's membership in the latter body was suspended. The list of accusations was lengthy for Mugabe's government, as several issues were raised, which range from human rights abuses to election rigging, and undermining one's own economy.¹³ The UK, Australia and New Zealand had pushed earlier for punitive action against Zimbabwe, which was rejected at the 2002 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). In March 2002, the CHOGM Chair-in-Office, alongside the former and future Chairs (The Troika)¹⁴ decided that Zimbabwe would be suspended from the Commonwealth, following a report of the Commonwealth Observer Group,¹⁵ which emphasized a problem that had developed in Zimbabwe; namely, the government-instigated violence surrounding the then-recent elections. The Report, which was later quoted by the Chair of the Troika stated that: "the presidential election was marred by a high level of politically motivated violence"¹⁶ and that "the conditions in Zimbabwe did not adequately allow for a free expression of will by the electors".¹⁷ South Africa's own observation missions, however,¹⁸ reported that the elections had been legitimate,¹⁹ granted the opposition parties participated in the election.²⁰ We argue that despite being allowed to formally participate in elections, opposition parties need not be harassed by the party in power, not have their votes stolen and their members and voters impeded from casting their ballot. Everything less is just a mimicry of democracy and far from a free and legitimate electoral process. Given Sou-

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13. John Hatchard, Muna Ndulo and Peter Slinn, *Comparative Constitutionalism and Good Governance in the Commonwealth: An Eastern and Southern African Perspective* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11.
 14. The Troika was composed of Thabo Mbeki – President of South Africa, whom had ended his chairmanship earlier that month, John Howard – Prime Minister of Australia – scheduled to hold office until December the following year, and Olusegun Obasanjo, the President of Nigeria.
 15. See Commonwealth Secretariat, *Zimbabwe Presidential Elections, 9-12 March 2002: The Report of the Commonwealth Observer Group* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2003).
 16. *Ibid.*, 43.
 17. *Ibid.*, 44.
 18. The government in Pretoria sent 50 people, representing different areas (government, NGOs unions and businesses), to gather and compile data. A parliamentary observation mission, comprised of 20 persons was also on the ground.
 19. South African Observer Mission, "Interim Statement by the South African Observer Mission on the Zimbabwean Presidential Elections", *Department of International Relations and Cooperation of South Africa*, March 13th, 2002, <https://bit.ly/3LcE5yj>.
 20. *Ibid.*

th Africa had constantly minimized the amplitude of Zimbabwe's problems, especially when presenting the situation to the international community, any admission that it had been wrong up to that point would have posed a series of questions for the credibility of the regime in Pretoria, concomitantly constituting an insufficient excuse for past misinformation. Such a concession would have called for South Africa's immediate action and for a reversal of foreign policy towards Zimbabwe, one which the former's acting president, Thabo Mbeki was not willing to take into consideration. Thus, we argue that the results presented by both South Africa's observer missions were in harmony with the government's foreign policy goals, not with the facts and political behaviours of The Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front's (ZANU-PF) members and clientele during the 2002 elections.

Bargain, bark, belittle - to no avail

While all other Commonwealth suspensions had been indefinite up to that point, in Zimbabwe's case, a period of one year was stipulated. This one-year term led Zimbabwean officials to believe that the suspension would automatically be lifted on 19 March 2003. However, procedurally, the suspension needed to be lifted by the same body that imposed it, namely the Troika, as Australia's Prime Minister had announced from the get-go.²¹ Nearing the Spring of 2003, the Troika couldn't come to a unanimous decision, with Australia favouring a prolonged suspension and South Africa and Nigeria both siding to end it. In a letter to Howard, Obasanjo wrote: "I believe that the time is now auspicious to lift the sanctions on Zimbabwe with regard to her suspension from the Commonwealth Councils",²² adding that "President Thabo Mbeki shares the same view".²³ The letter contained several clearly biased paragraphs, supporting Mugabe's actions or, circumstantially, lack thereof: it implied that Zimbabwe's land reform was a responsible decision at the time it ensued, that the ZANU-PF government had put together a Z\$4-billion package to compensate dispossessed commercial farmers, that these farmers had

21. See Commonwealth Secretariat, *Meeting of Commonwealth Chair Persons' Committee on Zimbabwe*, press release 02/26, March 19th, 2002, par. 8, <https://bit.ly/421QOzs>.

22. See Olusegun Obasanjo, "Nigeria Calls on Australia to Reinstate Zimbabwe in Commonwealth: Olusegun Obasanjo's Letter to John Howard", *Southern African Regional Poverty Network*, February 12th, 2002, par. 19, <https://bit.ly/3T7Rijq>.

23. *Ibid.*, par. 4.

been in an active dialogue with the government, and that the latter had means of attacking the malpractices if they deemed fit to do so.²⁴

In reality, the only known sum allocated for compensation at the time amounted to a mere 0.25% of what Obasanjo claimed; the farmers' outcry was not taken into consideration, and the latter had no formal way of denouncing malpractices and seeing those responsible brought to justice. The letter also claimed that the government was pushing the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) as a means of ensuring prosecutions succeed,²⁵ despite all the international outrage surrounding the new draconian piece of legislation, which effectively annulled free press in Zimbabwe. When discussing the state-backed violence against the opposing party's supporters, Obasanjo falsely asserted that the police 'apologized' for their cruelty and that punishment for those involved was on its way.²⁶ Obasanjo's motives, of course, went beyond the allegiance to an African brother, which was fighting off the colonial North. 2003 came with very troubled elections in Nigeria, where Obasanjo's People's Democratic Party won a landslide victory, marked by a near-perfect turnout in places where international observers had reported low numbers of voters.²⁷

Despite efforts from both Mbeki and Obasanjo, John Howard could not be persuaded. As a result, with almost a month to spare, the Prime Minister of Australia and the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth declared that the suspension imposed on Zimbabwe would not be lifted, at least not prior to the next CHOGM, later that year, when Nigeria was supposed to obtain chairmanship.

The decision, which had been widely known beforehand, sparked an attack on John Howard from South Africa's acting Foreign Affairs Director-General, Abdul Minty, during a Commonwealth briefing in February 2003. Minty accused the Australian Prime Minister of subjectivity when it comes to Zimbabwe and of breaching confidentiality with regards to telephone calls he had received from both Mbeki and Obasanjo.²⁸ In the same letter from February,

24. *Ibid.*, parrs. 5-11.

25. *Ibid.*, parr. 15.

26. *Ibid.*, parr. 17.

27. Patrick Bond, *South Africa and Global Apartheid: Continental and International Policies and Politics* (Uppsala, SE: Nordic Africa Institute, 2004), 18.

28. Abdul Minty, quoted in *Mail & Guardian*, "Minty's Broadside Startles Diplomats", *Mail & Guardian*, February 13th, 2003, <https://bit.ly/3LaFLOq>.

Obasanjo had argued that “this unfortunate decision [to maintain sanctions] would seem ... to compromise Australia’s position as an honest broker in the Zimbabwean crisis”.²⁹ South Africa’s Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma later admitted that South Africa shares the Nigerian President’s perspective on the said point.

This marked a clear sign that South Africa was with Zimbabwe all the way, despite the latter having not fulfilled any of the prerequisite conditions for the Commonwealth’s passive sanction to be lifted. We consider that South Africa was not necessarily pushing for an end to sanctions at the time, rather it was trying to keep the Commonwealth from imposing further punitive measures on its neighbour. The government in Pretoria was using ‘extremity bargaining’ to meet its counterparts somewhere in the middle with regards to requests. In addition, African leaders had misunderstood Australia’s role in the situation, for it was never to take on the role of the honest broker, rather it was to act against any development that would not meet Commonwealth norms and to push Zimbabwe’s government to refrain from any anti-democratic practices it had triggered and supported. Siding with Zimbabwe and expressing dissatisfaction towards Howard’s decisions and his activity as Chair put South Africa’s relations with Australia under some tension. Nearing December, the next milestone for a further decision, several Commonwealth leaders met in Abuja, Nigeria. The meetings, in which six states were called upon to make a proposition for all the Commonwealth were heated and resulted in deadlock.

Tony Blair was pushing for further suspension, backed by Australia and Canada, while Obasanjo was the voice of the coalition formed by South Africa and Mozambique - arguing for the readmission of Zimbabwe into the Commonwealth. India and the chair of the meetings, Jamaica expressed their neutrality. While Mugabe was continuously proclaiming that the division in the ‘Zimbabwe case’ was on race lines - rather than higher principles, things were not actually black and white at all: Ghana, Botswana, Sierra Leone and other African states wanted the suspension reinforced, but kept low profiles, fearing Mugabe’s reaction.³⁰ African leaders knew that Mugabe’s words still weighted heavily across Africa; and siding with a colonial enemy, which did not share blood ties nor a history of struggle, would be close to ‘treason of kin’.

29. Obasanjo, “Nigeria Calls on Australia”, parr. 2.

30. Richard Dowden, “Blair Fails to Reach Commonwealth Agreement on Zimbabwe Exclusion”, *The Independent*, December 6th, 2003, <https://bit.ly/3T9j4fh>.

Africanism, colonialism, imperialism, land and kin

After a disputed decision in Abuja, which made Zimbabwe's suspension indefinite, Mugabe withdrew from the Commonwealth - a decision that was announced at a ZANU-PF congress. During this entire period, South Africa, through the voice of President Mbeki, sided with Zimbabwe, accusing the UK in unison of neo-colonial practices.³¹ Mbeki had tried his best to get Mugabe invited to the Abuja meeting, and Obasanjo, who had issued invitations, seemed to be on board, but increased pressures from Ottawa, London and Canberra, which noted regressions in all spheres of Zimbabwean politics, brought the former's efforts to a forced stop.

Earlier in 2002, Britain had proposed active sanctions for Zimbabwe, believing that the AIPPA, which had been drafted by Parliament and pushed by the ZANU-PF government, would be used either control or silence the media, making it an offence to criticize Mugabe's followers.

We argue Mugabe's repetition of the anti-imperialist discourse was strong enough to persuade South Africa that Britain's accusations lacked any fundament. Convincing the government in Pretoria was not as difficult as one would imagine, for, arguably, South Africa's foreign policy was based on three paradigms: Africanism, anti-imperialism and democracy.³² While the first two are complementary and never come into conflict, the latter had non-alignment issues with the former. When all three could not be accommodated, the democratic paradigm tended to give way to the other two,³³ for these referred to the Marxist core-periphery imbalances theory;³⁴ one that encompasses numerous social (solidarity is the key to fight off the core's dominion), political (such the need for a restructuring of power inside the UN and other bodies), and economic (the economic domination of the North, in detriment of the impoverished South) grievances that could be resolved

31. Ian Taylor, "'The Devilish Thing': The Commonwealth and Zimbabwe's Dénouement", *The Round Table. The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 94, n.º 380 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358530500174630>.

32. Suzanne Graham, *Democratic South Africa's Foreign Policy: Voting Behaviour in the United Nations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 90.

33. James Barber, "The New South Africa's Foreign Policy: Principles and Practice", *International Affairs* 81, n.º 5 (2005): 1088, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2005.00503.x>.

34. Numerous authors have delved upon the World-systems theory; see the works of Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, Andre Gunder Frank, John W. Meyer.

only by solitary action.³⁵

Before his country was suspended from the Commonwealth, Mugabe had sent a letter to the organization, whereby promising that his government would respect the Declaration signed in Harare, protect human rights, and end the endemic political turmoil engulfed in violence. Mugabe was either incapable of keeping his promise, or unwilling to do so. We believe that the latter serves as a more accurate interpretation. Mugabe had no interest in ending a campaign of intimidation his party had orchestrated and put in motion with the purpose of securing a new presidency.

Even upon winning the controversial elections, politically-driven violence continued in Zimbabwe, as a way of silencing any critics and punishing the political opposition, The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and its supporters. On the ground, South Africa's ceaseless fight to keep Zimbabwe inside the Commonwealth alienated MDC leaders. MDC president Morgan Tsvangirai, who had been accused at the time of treason - in an absurd attempt to denigrate him and keep him out of the upcoming elections - warned that Mbeki had yielded to blackmail and had "embarked on an international safari to campaign for Mugabe's regime".³⁶ Tsvangirai saw South Africa's points of view - expressed during the early 2000s both inside and outside the Commonwealth - as a departure from quiet diplomacy and movement towards the 'noisy approval' of Mugabe's regime, concluding that, by instilling a government of national unity, as Pretoria had recommended, the situation in Zimbabwe was to be controlled, not resolved.³⁷ Mugabe's attacks on the British were further considered a despicable way of alleviating international pressure, although even the scarce essential supplies still available to Zimbabweans came from London.³⁸

As a result of the continuous suspension debate, which had at its core numerous human rights infringements, more losers emerged than winners. One of them, according to Hussein Solomon, professor at the University of Pretoria, was Mbeki, who had lost his credibility as a leader and strayed away

35. Laurie Nathan, "Consistency and Inconsistencies in South Africa's Foreign Policy in Africa", *International Affairs* 81, n.º 2 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2005.00455.x>.

36. Morgan Tsvangirai, President of the MDC's Speech to MDC Parliamentarians, Harare, December 18th, 2002, in Bond, *South Africa and Global Apartheid*, 19.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

from the principles of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and African renaissance.³⁹ Mbeki had been one of the fathers of NEPAD - an economic development program of the African Union, which, amongst other things, offered economic aid in exchange for incorporating and developing good governance within states.

Mbeki also had his share of critics back home; Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, the director of studies at the South African Institute of International Affairs, called for a change in Pretoria's strategy, arguing that Zimbabwe would implode economically, hurting both the efforts of The Southern African Development Community's (SADC) members and the NEPAD endeavour as a whole.⁴⁰ She advertised sending clear messages to Mugabe, even by utilizing quiet diplomacy methods,⁴¹ thereby implying that South Africa had been too relaxed about what was going on in Zimbabwe and too preoccupied by how the events were seen inside the Commonwealth.

Sidiropoulos essentially argued that South Africa shielded Zimbabwe's image, instead of doing something structurally productive for its neighbour. Nevertheless, Mbeki had gone as far as bandwagoning alongside a small group of African countries and opposing the re-election of Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon. This unprecedented move was an attempt to punish the leader from New Zealand, whom had been vocally demanding Zimbabwe's continued suspension. McKinnon withstood a 40-11 vote, rendering Pretoria's accusations and wishes obsolete.

After returning from the Abuja Summit, Mbeki created, with the help of other SADC leaders, a statement of that organization (plus Uganda), in which it was claimed that members of the Commonwealth had been "dismissive, intolerant and rigid",⁴² and that they sought to transform their African counterparts into "grateful and subservient recipients".⁴³ Although no such member had been named, Mbeki's words were aimed at Tony Blair, who stood accused of playing the 'wrong card' since the 2002 suspension talks inside the Commonwealth. Blair had overwhelmingly focused on the land reform and land dispossessions, neglecting the various human rights infringement con-

39. News24, "Mbeki Could Harm Nepad", *News24*, December 8th, 2003, <https://bit.ly/3ysQiNp>.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. Stephen Chan, *Grasping Africa: A Tale of Achievement and Tragedy* (London: IB Tauris, 2007), 140.

43. *Ibid.*, 141.

cerns raised by other Commonwealth members, thus giving African leaders fuel for a racially driven debate.

Despite Blair's constant denial that the UK had any residual financial interests in Zimbabwe's land reform, critics were not convinced, considering the UK aimed to protect the interests of whites, while the rest of Zimbabwe's population was seen as collateral. Mbeki later expressed, in one of his weekly letters⁴⁴ published on his party's official site, a dismissive attitude regarding the initial motive for suspending Zimbabwe, by quoting the observation mission that his government had sent to Zimbabwe, which reported upon arrival that: "the mission is therefore of the view that the outcome of the elections represents the legitimate voice of the people of Zimbabwe".⁴⁵ Mbeki also implied that, since the mission from Pretoria had stayed longer on the ground than the Commonwealth's observer mission and had collaborated with the latter, the former cannot be wrong.⁴⁶

Referring to history, both recent and of the past decades, Mbeki stated that the land issue was inflammatorily dealt with by the British, who did not suppress Ian Smith's rebellion in 1965, due to the fact their own 'kith and kin' had more important interests than those of the African majority.⁴⁷ As a result, Zimbabwe's 1979 Constitution had entrenched clauses that protected the white's ownership rights for ten years; clauses which no Northern government had supported repelling since. After managing to acquire pledges for the funds required for the acquisition of 118 farms and handing over the issue to the UN, it was swallowed whole and forgotten due to bureaucracy.⁴⁸ Mbeki's letter argued that granted the failure to restore land in Zimbabwe, "a forcible process of land redistribution perhaps became inevitable".⁴⁹

Surely, the act of forcibly removing property owners from their properties through the violent methods used by a government-sponsored militia, however 'inevitable' it may have seemed to the President of South Africa, was nothing of the sorts. Rather, one can argue that it is a manoeuvre, orchestrated by an increasingly authoritarian government, to utilize the latent sentiment of

44. Thabo Mbeki, "We Will Resist the Upside-Down View of Africa", *The Insider*, 2003, <https://bit.ly/3mGpXsu>.

45. *Ibid.*, parr. 14.

46. *Ibid.*, parr. 15.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, parrs. 21-36.

49. *Ibid.*, parr. 28.

a majority population that had historically been politically oppressed, in order to capitalize in elections. While the urgency of the events taking place in Zimbabwe – particularly the land redistribution reform – is open to debate, the methods used for gaining political momentum are unjustifiable. Nevertheless, Mbeki sought justification, as he did for the critique targeting him for his preferred diplomatic strain, that of quiet diplomacy.⁵⁰

In the same letter, Mbeki referenced Kissinger's seminal work 'Diplomacy',⁵¹ arguing that the CHOGM episodes displayed similarities to how Reagan raised the human rights issue during the Cold War to help overthrow political regimes.⁵² For Mbeki, the entire issue seemed one of forceful regime change from those which could not, such as Americans under Reagan, passively wait for free institutions to evolve inside a state.⁵³ Thus, in Mbeki's eyes, while state-sponsored violence and dispossession were the last resort in Zimbabwe, punishment for these acts should be slow or non-existent in the realm of international relations. One could argue that Mbeki's claims go far beyond any realist's dream of how the political spectrum is organized globally. Mbeki also expressed his deep concern that the suspension would only delay political reconciliation and economic restructuring.⁵⁴ We find that this argument has some validity: within the framework of an international inter-governmental body such as the Commonwealth, there is a better chance of moving towards a fuller democracy than there is in isolation.

As might be expected, some conditions have to be met to attain further democratization: namely a wish, frail as it may be, to achieve democratic outcomes has to exist inside the governing body of a country. However, in the case of Zimbabwe, while this wish had been verbalized by the Mugabe government on many separate occasions, in practice, only dismal progress has been achieved, and the country, especially during the initial one-year period of suspension, has done nothing to revert to the best-practices it had initially adhered to, only to later disregard. Thus, it was far better for Zimbabwe to be a part of the Commonwealth, as long as the Commonwealth, through its internal workings, could exert enough pressure to ensure the desired outcome of democratic consolidation.

50. See Dan Petrica, "Quiet Diplomacy: South Africa's Way of Dealing with Zimbabwe during the Presidency of Thabo Mbeki", *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai - Studia Europaea* 4 (2016), <https://bit.ly/3LeZ0Gw>.

51. See Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

52. Kissinger, quoted in Mbeki, "We Will Resist", parr. 36.

53. *Ibid.*, parr. 38.

54. *Ibid.*, parr. 42.

Mugabe, on the other hand, was closely observing Mbeki's political moves and the developments in the former's narrative. In his new feud with the UK and Australia, Zimbabwe's president might have been overjoyed that someone appropriated parts of his discourse, and was ready to further develop the said narrative. Zimbabwe's withdrawal from the Commonwealth could be labelled as a gesture of pride, foremost. Granted his actions, one might consider Mugabe a person that likes to bask in the international limelight; subsequently, we envisage that there must have been some degree of satisfaction that his actions, despite resulting in the isolation of his country, managed to create rifts among the international community.

Whilst constantly searching for international approval, Mugabe has permanently sought regional and national validation – especially after his organization won 'problematic', if not rigged elections. As one commentator puts it: "he would perhaps like to be the headmaster's favourite, which he once was".⁵⁵ Since he was unable to retain this position, the role of 'international bad-boy' didn't seem quite demeaning. Even so, as the North was turning against him, the lack of Commonwealth support from his closest peers, clearly increased both his anger and the number of his worries. As a result, Mugabe tried to minimize the Commonwealth, by drawing a comparison with one of George Orwell's infamous novellas:⁵⁶ "The Commonwealth[...]has become like an Animal Farm where some members are more equal than others. How can Blair claim to regulate and direct events and still say all of us are equals?".⁵⁷ One cannot accuse Mugabe of having been naïve and not understanding the power structure in this or any other international organization, but he could be accused of doublespeak. While his narrative worked, in part, for his at-home auditorium and some African Peers, it did not for the EU or the US.⁵⁸

55. Chan, *Grasping Africa*, 141.

56. George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which was written in the wake of World War II, constitutes a biting satire of totalitarianism. It tells a simple story of farm animals rebelling against their masters, and their efforts to manage themselves in the aftermath of mutiny. Ultimately, the novel depicts how good intentions can lead to tyranny. It provides one immortal phrase about equality: "Everyone is equal, but some are more equal than others".

57. Robert Mugabe, quoted in Chris Chinaka and Ed Johnson, "Mugabe: Commonwealth is 'Animal Farm'", *The Independent*, December 7th, 2003, parr. 10, <https://bit.ly/422CbvH>.

58. In 2003, in conjuncture with the international community, especially the Commonwealth and the EU, the US government extended sanctions, which had been previously put in place.

On the meaning of democracy

We argue that Mugabe believed that ‘democracy’ is to be treated as a ‘charade word’, a pretext the North uses to coerce developing states around the globe in general, and specifically to make Zimbabwe submit. Even though democracy is an articulation of the North, its relevance and meaning reach far beyond what Mugabe tried to imply. Minimizing the value of democracy, even of one particular string of democracy promoted but the US and its allies may be perilous for a regime, weather peril should be brought about by peer pressure internationally, or by a sickened population nationally. One must admit that democracy is quite difficult to quantify, due to the numerous juxtaposed layers that need to be taken into consideration.

Nonetheless, most parts of the world operate within the principles dictated by Northern values: such as human rights, free elections, free speech and assembly, separation of power and rule of law. We reiterate that it is within the above postulates that the core of democracy resides. While it was fitting for Mugabe and ZANU-PF to resort to such principles in previous decades, when trying to overthrow a minority government, as time had passed, the above signifiers became voided discursively and were filled up with new meaning, which transcended the field of discourse altogether.⁵⁹ For Mugabe’s political purposes, his population, his neighbours and the international community in its entirety need to know that Zimbabwe is democratic - just not according to the vision of the North. It was arduously argued that another form of democracy prevails. While the slight alteration of values to make them fit one community is allowed, even desirable, we claim that these values need to remain remotely the same at their core.

For example, rule of law guarantees the equal treatment of citizens by the judicial power. If under the declared auspices of rule of law, a state ends up treating citizens differently, based on any kind of hierarchy, racial or social status, we are faced with an illogical and perverted construction. For some terms, meaning is unalienable. What Mugabe was trying to achieve resembled, in part, what Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, later referenced - drawing on the terms developed by Fareed Zakaria.⁶⁰ In claiming that his

59. See Dan Petrica, “Discursive Struggle and Social Change in South Africa in the Mid 1990’s”, *Analele Universităţii din Oradea* 8 (2016), <https://bit.ly/311sg9d>.

60. See Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy”, *Foreign Affairs* 76, n.º 6 (1997), <https://bit.ly/2LRzTKJ>.

country will become an illiberal democracy,⁶¹ Orbán has annulled the term 'democracy' altogether. While Orbán and other autocrats advertise the absence of civil liberties, when presenting a hybrid, pseudo-democratic product, Mugabe was more cunning.

For him, the variations of what constitutes democratic were up for grabs, according to what he wanted to achieve. He never called for illiberal democracy or partial democracy, rather insisting that a fully democratic form of government can exist, without the prerequisites advertised by the North. The North, observing the logical fracture, refused to go along, while some partners in Africa accepted Mugabe's views because they were accommodating the latter's interests. As such, the North needs to re-establish its values in Zimbabwe, for they had been eroded and, to do so, used South Africa for mitigation. Africa has had its fair share of autocrats, including Idi Amin Dada of Uganda, Mácias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia's Mengistu Haile Mariam, Central Africa Republic's self-proclaimed Emperor Jean-Bédél Bokassa and, more recently, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya. Dictators, as was anticipated, find the idea that democracy is relative empowering and support the claim that each country should decide the path it wants to follow in pursuit of the democratic strings they deem fit. Furthermore, the said 'band of brothers', comprised of rulers which contest the core principles of democracy, have a way of standing together in the worst of times.

Conclusion

As a result of the continued support of South Africa and other African peers inside the Commonwealth, a potentially critical opportunity, in the attempt to further democratization in Zimbabwe, was missed – or better put, annulled. The failure of Thabo Mbeki's government to grasp that coercive action conducted by African members was needed to halt and, later, try to revert Mugabe's profoundly antidemocratic practices, coupled with South Afri-

61. Viktor Orbán, "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp", *Magyarország Jobban Teljesít*, July 26th, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2wubZze>. For example, in 2001, while traditional external donors had retracted from Zimbabwe, Libya was willing to provide Zimbabwe aid in oil worth 45mil. In 2002, after Mugabe's re-election, the two countries signed a trade deal. Thus, Libya took the role of a democratic spoiler, severely limiting the economic leverage of other actors such as South Africa.

ca' vivid unwillingness to sacrifice its own foreign relations objectives for the sake of stability at its borders and democracy across said borders, marked the impossibility to create a strong majority within the Commonwealth.

The absence of a strong majority, if not centred around, at least with the concert of African political strongholds such as South Africa and Nigeria, contributed to the further descent of Zimbabwe into autocracy. Zimbabwe's suspension could thus be discursively used by Robert Mugabe in an attempt to recreate narrations centred on neocolonialism and domination politics, while drawing attention away from his government's kleptocracy, mismanagement and profoundly undemocratic practices. While the fate of Robert Mugabe is now known, the future of ZANU-PF is a distinct issue, for even with Mugabe overthrown, the party seems to still be able to capitalize under new leadership and continue, at least in part, the practices it has created and enforced throughout the early 2000s, as the calls for lifting sanctions of any sorts become more vocal.

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