

Zimbabwe's Continued Isolation

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In late November 2017 Emmerson Mnangagwa replaced Robert Mugabe as President of Zimbabwe in a 'military assisted transition'. He declared Zimbabwe 'open for business' as the cornerstone of his foreign policy. Hopes were nurtured that this would bring some improvement in human and political rights domestically and greater opportunity for Western investment.

The West and Sanctions

Unimpressed by the rhetoric, the US extended restrictive measures against targeted individuals and companies in August 2018. In March 2019, US sanctions were renewed for 141 individuals and some 56 companies. In contrast, EU foreign ministers agreed in February 2019, that there would be no sanctions imposed on members of the government, although measures sanctioning certain persons linked to the previous regime would remain in place. In 2019, the EU aid package added up to 67.5 million Euro, totalling 287 million Euro since 2014, making the EU Zimbabwe's biggest donor. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU added another 14.2 million Euro humanitarian assistance in 2020.

Despite such contributions, Mnangagwa continued to blame the West for sanctions he compared with cancer. Given its concessions, the EU was not impressed. Responding to criticism at an anti-sanctions day march in October 2019 it declared: "Zimbabwe is not where it is because of the so-called sanctions, but years of mismanagement of the economy and corruption". Similarly, the US Ambassador dismissed "any responsibility for the catastrophic state of the economy and the government's abuse of its own citizens". State Security minister Owen Ncube was added to the sanctions list for state-sanctioned human rights abuses under the new dispensation. US Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair Jim Risch called upon SADC members to "focus their energies on supporting democracy, not kleptocratic regimes", which led to Zimbabwean Foreign Minister Moyo threatening to cut diplomatic ties with Washington.

Return to the Commonwealth?

Zimbabwe was suspended from the Commonwealth for human rights violations related to the presidential elections and the "fast track" land reform in 2002. In December 2003, Mugabe ended membership before the suspension could be extended. Mnangagwa expressed his wish to re-join the Commonwealth, hoping this would benefit the removal of US sanctions and EU measures.

When the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting took place in April 2018, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson met his Zimbabwean counterpart at a side event. This led to a statement that the UK would support Zimbabwe's re-entry to the Commonwealth in expectation that the government would deliver "the free and fair elections the people of Zimbabwe deserve".

However, these prospects were soon dashed by the regime's violent reaction to the protests following the elections in July 2018. In February 2019, UK's Africa Minister Harriet Baldwin declared that her government would no longer support Zimbabwe's readmission. Mnangagwa angrily riposted that such application was submitted to the Commonwealth Secretariat and not to the UK. In September 2019 he met with Patricia Scotland during the UN General Assembly meeting. Foreign Minister, Sibusiso Moyo, subsequently reached out to the Modi Government in India to back its re-entry, but no progress has yet eventuated.

In search of friends

The deterioration of Zimbabwe's relations with the West had coincided with growing Chinese interest in the resources on the African continent for its own rapid industrialisation, as an investment opportunity and as a market for its manufactured goods. Zimbabwe's growing isolation from the West offered a convenient entry point and China soon emerged as a reliable partner. However, China's involvement was spurred less by solidarity than by self-interest.

Increasingly concerned about Mugabe's indigenization policy. Mnangagwa's elevation to the presidency had received China's blessing. Nonetheless, strains were soon to appear when it became increasingly apparent that Zimbabwe was unable to service its debts. What particularly rankled in Beijing was that Zimbabwe's incapacity to pay its dues was deemed to be an outcome of the government's misappropriation or misuse of Chinese funds.

It is increasingly evident that Mnangagwa's hopes of re-orienting Zimbabwe's foreign policy have failed. As under Mugabe, the government has displayed a contempt for human and civil rights, democracy and the rule of law. Its hopes that a more attractive business environment can be achieved without such ingredients has run foul of its repressive response to mounting economic and political crisis. Foreign policy remains locked in the recent times past: looking to regional solidarity, estranged from the West, and increasingly dependent upon China.

Its failure to restore friendly relations with the West, and the similar failure of its "look east policy" to bear fruit, has left the Mnangagwa regime with few options. Nowadays Russia has entered the arena, showing increased interest in the extractive industries, arms trade and political fraternisation. But who needs enemies with friends like these?