

COMMENTARY

ZIMBABWE: BEYOND THE DEMOCRATIC IMPASSE

CHERYL HENDRICKS

Few countries in Africa attract sustained international media coverage without the presence of a civil war. Countries beyond the Limpopo rarely attract close scrutiny by the South African citizenry either, and their policies and practices seldom evoke domestic outbursts or mobilisation. Zimbabwe, since its 2000 general elections, has achieved this feat. Unfortunately, this particularity is derived from many of the factors that led to the disintegration of other post-colonial African states. The Zimbabwean government's resistance to democratisation, its reassertion of a narrow African nationalism, the government's repressive tactics, and the country's economic decline have catapulted it into that category of states whose names are always followed by the word 'crisis'. But the inability of the opposition movement to oust the ruling party through elections and a host of ineffective bilateral and multilateral state and civil society interventions have prolonged the crisis. There is general familiarity with (even if there is no consensus on) the historical and contemporary factors that produced the stalemate so there is little added value in reproducing them here. Instead, this commentary will focus on the need for an alternative strategy in order to move beyond Zimbabwe's democratic impasse.

Peace and security are recognised by Africa's continental and sub-regional organisations as key to socio-political and economic develop-

ment and are incorporated into their policy frameworks. One of the major moves in the discourse on peace and security is the adoption of a human security perspective. This implies a fundamental shift from focus solely on the security of the state to the security and/or wellbeing of its citizens. This ideological alteration results from the changed nature of conflict from inter-state to intra-state, conflict generators being located in the policies and practices of governments, citizens being the victims of conflict and domestic conflicts having geographically widespread effects. However, although the new paradigm is human security, until now practices by states and multilateral institutions have been essentially state-centric. This is clearly evidenced in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), particularly in relation to Zimbabwe.

The SADC Protocol on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation reaffirms the "principle of strict respect for sovereignty, sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, good neighbourliness, interdependence, non-aggression and non-interference in internal affairs of other States", though it also enables the organ to "seek to resolve any significant inter-state conflict between State Parties or between a State Party and non-State Party". The principle of sovereignty has often been a stumbling block for outside intervention because most African states assert this right

when accused of breach of norms and standards of good governance. The principle is there primarily to protect governments, not citizens. The 'significant inter-state conflict' clause conditioning intervention was a step in the right direction, but the strategies employed to give effect to this clause, especially in Zimbabwe, have yielded few positive results.

Zimbabwe has been on the SADC agenda since 2001. The main forms of intervention to resolve the multi-faceted crisis in the country have largely been limited to persuasion and mediation. South Africa, employing a strategy of 'quiet diplomacy,' has been a key interlocutor in attempts to bring ZANU-PF and the MDC to the negotiating table. Negotiations were to centre on the modalities for a government of national unity. South Africa has experienced many frustrations in executing this task as ZANU-PF refused to talk to the MDC. The ruling party's position on negotiations became more dogmatic after it secured victory in the 2005 general elections. In response, South Africa recently backtracked on trying to facilitate negotiations. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Aziz Pahad stated that "we are negotiating in the broad context that we need fundamental economic changes and how we minimize the political tensions of Zimbabwe without necessarily talking about Government of National Unity". Meanwhile the African Union has intervened, appointing President Joachim Chissano of Mozambique as mediator between the major political actors in Zimbabwe. Although the credibility and experience of the mediator are always important in negotiations, introducing this change alone is unlikely to be more productive, as this is not the source of the main hindrances to moving the process forward. The dismissal by ZANU-PF of President Chissano's overtures is indicative of this.

This tiptoeing round the Zimbabwean government can be traced to the role it has played in SADC, to common perceptions on issues of race and land, to the perceived lack of a credible alternative, and to insufficient agreement on the type of intervention that is needed. Post-colonial Zimbabwe, with President Mugabe at the helm, was a steadfast supporter of liberation movements in the region and had to bear untold costs for this loyalty. There is therefore

a strong admiration for, and indebtedness to, a person and country largely perceived as simply having gone astray. Zimbabwe, before the arrival of post-apartheid South Africa, was a key player in SADC (the organisation was formed 25 years ago when Zimbabwe received its independence). It was charged with sectoral responsibility for peace and security prior to SADC's restructuring. Zimbabwe's decision to send troops to the Congo in 1998 - against the wishes of the South African government but with the backing of Namibia and Angola - signalled a rift in SADC, as the old and new powerhouses struggled to set the regional agenda. Sensitivity to this history and tensions within SADC limit the organisational approach to 'lowest common denominator' interventions in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwean crisis cannot be reduced to that of an undemocratic government. The unresolved national question (continued land ownership inequalities) played a major role in the form of state practices that ensued, admittedly only forcefully engaged when ZANU-PF felt the pressure of opposition politics. The state justified its actions through a discourse that reached to the heart of the quest for liberation in the region, namely anti-imperialism, racism, and land alienation. Regional support for change created the difficulties in forming a common platform against the human rights abuses that were transpiring and reaching an agreement on the necessary forms of intervention.

Although the MDC showed great potential in 2000 and 2002, it has been weakened by repression and its own organisational deficiencies. Its inability to gain sufficient support in the 2005 elections confirmed this. The MDC has largely been reduced to a barking dog with no bite, making it harder to pressurise ZANU-PF into negotiating with it.

South Africa's approach to Zimbabwe of 'quiet diplomacy' has generated impatience in MDC cadres and civil society organisations in the region. They wanted a more forceful engagement, for instance sanctions to secure President Mugabe's departure, which were posited as non-negotiable. Both these approaches were concerned primarily with changing the composition of the power base in the belief

that this would create stability and development. In the interim, Zimbabwe's citizens bore the brunt of the power struggle, forced to choose between living in poverty or becoming part of the growing African diaspora.

Democratisation and reconciliation at the level of the state are key for peace and security. However, these processes often take years to yield results. A human security perspective does not negate these processes. It complements them with interventions at lower levels and assistance to the victims of power struggles. Far too much emphasis was placed on getting the MDC and ZANU-PF to negotiate, to the exclusion of dialogue, reconciliation and development at other levels of governance.

Re-building Zimbabwe requires far more than elite pacting. It involves building the institutions and the capacity that sustain democratisation and avoiding the slippery slope between democracy and autocracy so common in the 'virtual democracies'⁵ on the African continent. If there is general agreement that the Zimbabweans themselves must resolve the Zimbabwean crisis, then the onus is on the regional community to ensure that Zimbabweans have the environment and tools

to effect this change. Zimbabweans are not only the office-bearers of ZANU-PF and the MDC. Strategies aimed at effecting change must therefore be broad based.

The recent move away from emphasising a government of national unity to concentrating on rescuing the Zimbabwean economy is prudent. Optimal functioning of SADC is conditioned by the strength of its member economies. The Zimbabwean economy declined from the second largest in the region to sixth or seventh place.⁶ This slide has wider regional implications for peace and security. Arguments that assert that helping to re-build the Zimbabwean economy only sustains the current power holders are shortsighted. A strong economy is a necessary condition for democratic consolidation and fits into the advocated human security perspective. SADC must make a greater effort to implement its human security policy framework and draw on the resources in the region for this. Here, too, non-state institutions can play an effective complementary role to state processes. When states, multilateral organisations and civil society work together to ensure the security of all in the region, the democratic impasse in Zimbabwe will be ended.