

Things are changing around Zimbabwe, but will it lead to change?

During November Zimbabwe was very much in the news.

Comments by both Mr Zuma and Pres Motlanthe indicated a much harder line from South Africa. The SA government stated that an earmarked R300million aid package was dependent on a government being formed in accordance with the power-sharing agreement negotiated earlier.

Patients from a cholera outbreak had to be treated in the SA town of Musina. Oxfam asked for a health emergency to be declared. Famine is looming if not already happening.

Clearly, South Africa has now replaced “quiet diplomacy” with “loud diplomacy”. Will that lead to a change in Zim? Let’s assess the prospects.

More like North Korea

Clients with whom we discussed this issue will know our view that Zimbabwe will first become a North Korea before it becomes anything else. In practice that means:

- everything is done to keep one man and his cronies in power;
- no regard for the suffering of the population (to paraphrase Bill Clinton, it is not the people, stupid, it is the power);
- mass starvation and general collapse; and
- no regard whatsoever for international or local opinion.

This is more or less how things have played out to date. Why will it now change? Neither suffering at home nor pressure from outside is going to influence Mugabe and his cronies.

The key point is that nothing will change in Zimbabwe until Mugabe and his Zanu-PF hardliners go. What will make them go? If they leave power they go to jail, or like Mussolini, worse... There are simply no incentives for Mugabe to go.

What will make him go?

Change from inside Zimbabwe looks unlikely. The electoral commission has declared Mugabe the loser in the presidential election. He simply keeps on ruling. Not a good omen for change via the ballot box.

Change from outside looks even less likely. Three things could be done:

- assassinate Mugabe;
- invade the country militarily and remove Mugabe;
- impose sanctions that will bring the Mugabe regime down.

Option one makes one a criminal in law. Option two is simply a non-starter. Option three can only work if the four neighbours who have transport links with Zim (SA,

Botswana, Zambia and Mocambique) all co-operate and close their borders with that country. The last time that happened was when John Vorster closed the border on Ian Smith. Many argue that the same thing should happen now. The comparison ignores three realities.

Firstly, last time round three countries had already closed their borders with Zimbabwe, at huge costs to themselves. When SA also closed its border, it was merely the last link in the chain. It would require a gigantic effort to get all four countries to close their borders this time round. Without that unanimity, sanctions are a pipe dream. Botswana has declared itself in favour of economic sanctions and border closure, but nobody else has yet. Mocambique in the mean time is resuscitating its Maputo port thanks to expanded trade with Africa.

Secondly, thanks to Cecil John Rhodes and a subsequent lack of infrastructure investment, the main road and railway routes into Africa from the south run through Zimbabwe. Impose sanctions and you cut yourself off from Africa. Trade with Africa was not a big issue in Vorster's time. It is now. SA would be out of its (economic) mind to cut itself off from the one market in the world where it has a definite competitive advantage. The argument that it will all be over in a week and trade can then resume ignores a North Korean like determination to stay on, irrespective what happens to the country.

Thirdly, there is China. If anybody has become to Mugabe what John Vorster was to Ian Smith, it must be China. Where does the forex come from that buys Mugabe his petrol and weapons? The Chinese are unlikely to join in sanctions. So even if the four African neighbours did close their borders, would they shoot down Chinese planes that fly into Zim or sink Chinese ships that dock in Luanda for Zim? Unlikely.

The option of no visas to Mugabe and his cronies is about as effective as swatting a fly – he can still visit Malaysia and China. And under international protocols he can also still, as head of state, visit New York and the EU. So he cannot come to Pretoria?

Power sharing deal

At this stage the only game in town is the power-sharing agreement Mr Mbeki negotiated in September. It is interesting that not even the Group of Elders called for Mr Mugabe's removal. They did, however, call for the power-sharing agreement to be implemented. The same demand has been made by the SADC and the SA government.

It is either that or no progress.

Will that agreement be implemented? So far it does not look too good. The MDC has walked away from it and is holding out for something better. They have also, repeatedly, called for Mbeki's dismissal as mediator. Mugabe threatens to go it alone but is probably constrained from doing that by the realisation that he then isolates himself even from SADC. The deadlock no doubt suits him: he remains in charge and nothing changes. So it is either Mbeki's power-sharing deal or it is further collapse.

Pres Motlanthe's position

By the way, there is an urban legend going around that Pres Motlanthe was leader of the SA observer mission to Zimbabwe that controversially declared the previous elections “free and fair”. We researched the matter, and could find no evidence of that. He was not even a member of that delegation. Yet, the allegation has been repeated as fact even in a Business Day op-ed.