

AFROPESSIMISM AND SA

31 March 2000

Zimbabwe's lessons for SA

The still rising threat of severe political and economic collapse in Zimbabwe – it is an ominously long way down that road already - has the potential to affect not only the people in that country but also the wider southern African region and probably most of the continent.

What makes this looming tragedy even worse is that, quite unlike the catastrophe of the floods in Mozambique which have taken such a cruel toll on a nation that has progressed so well in the past decade, Zimbabwe's misfortunes are overwhelmingly self-inflicted. Or, to be precise, they are the consequences of the follies of its vain, deluded leader, Robert Mugabe, and the greedy ruling clique around him who have prospered so mightily while the masses have suffered so much.

It's quite wrong, however, to assume that Zimbabwe has been on the skids right from the formal ending of white minority rule in 1980. It has not.

In the Eighties, the economy achieved good and tolerably soundly based growth. But Mugabe and his inner circle of power have proved unable to meet the challenges of recent years – and unwilling to let go of their richly privileged positions.

Though SA must guard against complacency, the evidence to date indicates a profound difference between the evolution of democracy in this country and the experience of Zimbabwe, for all the integrity shown by much of the judiciary and a few brave journalists there.

Former President Nelson Mandela, in spite of the aura of admiration he attracted globally, never imposed a personality cult on SA. Nor is that the style of his successor, Thabo Mbeki.

Granted, corruption is widespread in SA. But the various mechanisms, checks and balances of the Constitution, the parliamentary systems, the Bill of Rights, the rule of law and the separation of powers are building a deep-rooted democracy in SA.

Moreover, SA has enjoyed top quality economic management in terms of fiscal and monetary policies, though over-regulated labour markets and a dismally over-cautious approach to privatisation have cost us dearly.

The crucial point is that SA and Zimbabwe are vastly different countries. There is no justification for SA to have to suffer any kind of backlash of "Africa fatigue" because of the wretched situation north of the Limpopo.

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