

AFRO-PESSIMISM AND SA

5 May 2000

Zimbabwe: some distance please

In dealing with the man-made crisis in Zimbabwe, SA has to date applied a policy of behind-the-scenes diplomacy and developing a common approach among southern African nations. This is the most feasible option open to Government and should be pursued as best it can.

In the past week, however, conditions in Zimbabwe have deteriorated to such an extent that the interests of SA, and those of the sub-continent, now require that Government put some distance between this country and Zimbabwe.

Mugabe has intensified the campaign of intimidation of opponents. Official intimidation is now so severe that normal political activity is simply not possible. The police have used draconian powers to suppress legitimate political activity; Mugabe's officials have clamped down on the press; his ministers have announced plans to legalise the land grab; and his government continues to ignore the courts and to undermine the rule of law.

Enough evidence has emerged to confirm that Mugabe's regime engineered the land grab for party political reasons. It is all about the coming election and retaining political power, not redistribution to the poor. It is a ruthless, cold-blooded manipulation of poverty for the sake of power.

Mugabe is guilty of gross human rights violations and spectacular economic mismanagement. And all of this is playing itself out on the world's television screens.

SA and the greater subcontinent are being tainted with the Mugabe brush, undermining the twin goals of regional growth and job creation.

It is time to distance the subcontinent from Mugabe. Government must maintain its behind-the-scenes diplomacy but ministers should also publicly articulate the principles SA as a country is standing for.

Thus the need for land reform must be stressed but in the context of respect for life and property rights. International support for land reform can be sought but with the need for sound economic management emphasised. The need for the rule of law must be reiterated and the right to free political activity endorsed.

Deputy President Jacob Zuma has articulated some of these issues but in the most muted terms. President Thabo Mbeki has publicly expressed solidarity on the issue of land reform. He should now augment that with a clear statement of the above principles. And his ministers should join him.

SA deserves better than being tainted with the Mugabe brush. Its economic management is infinitely superior to Zimbabwe's, its redistribution policies more finely balanced and its fiscal and monetary policies incomparably more disciplined.

One is judged by the company one keeps. The more Mugabe becomes an outcast, the more the world must see the difference between him and the rest of the subcontinent. SA's Government must create that distance.

And all the more so since Mugabe may still win the polls up north.

**Originally published:
Finance Week – Comment
5 May 2000**