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On Crossroads: Reflections on Zimbabwe's Relations with Britain at the New Millennium

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The period following the election of the Labour Party in Britain into power has seen the relations between Zimbabwe and its former colonizer, Britain deteriorating. Deterioration of relations has been witnessed in the actions of government officials, civil society groups, media organizations, academics and citizens. Antagonism between the two countries arises from the conflict of values¹ essentially the pursuit of their divergent national interests in the postcolonial world where state autonomy is a myth coupled with the fact and the legacy of colonialism is very much alive. These divergent views, which are evident, bring into focus the nexus between land reform and economic development as well as issues on governance, human rights, political stability, race relations and equity. The network of class interest, commonality of interests and patterns of co-operation has a great bearing on a country's foreign policy. Cooperation between nations exists primarily when there is a commonality of interests, of which absence of the same presents some degree of enmity, a situation depicted by the current state of relations between these two states.

Background to Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy

In understanding any country's foreign policy it is important to outline the essential actors, their objectives as well as the overall geographical, historical and strategic factors that are at play. Since independence Zimbabwe reflects a policy that is more or less consistent and predictable. This is attributed to the manner in which the policies are formulated and that the present leader has been in power and has been the locus of decision making since independence in 1980 and through the manner in which nationhood was achieved.²

According to Stan Mudenge, Zimbabwe's Foreign Affairs Minister, Zimbabwe's foreign policy objective is fundamentally to help safeguard and enhance the security and prestige of the country. Also it is geared towards the improvement of quality of life of the Zimbabwean people. This is done through interaction with other countries at various levels in order to influence the behavior of other actors so that the international environment is conducive to the attainment of these goals. Hence, Zimbabwe is "guided by an overriding belief in and love for mankind, the sacredness and inviolability of our national sovereignty and the need for freedom, justice and equality for all"³

Lessons from the period of the struggle for independence of Zimbabwe are factored in, and play an important role in the foreign policy making process. The secretary for Foreign Affairs once hinted "our belief in ourselves as a people in charge of our destiny controlled by no power."⁴ Emerging is a major lesson that successful foreign policy is largely dependent on the ability and willingness to form coalitions and solidarity groups with other correspondingly minded states. This will bring about critical weight needed at a particular point in order to influence the case and events in a state's own favor. In the case of Zimbabwe, such coalitions are evident with support from some fellow SADC countries. A shining example is Namibia, as evidenced by then president, Sam Nujoma's speech at the Earth Summit in Durban 2001 explicitly blaming the British for having caused the problem in Zimbabwe.

There has been a general assumption that Zimbabwe's foreign policy is formulated at the highest level of the state apparatus with the president being the articulator of the foreign policy making process. This is attributed to the fact that different dimensions of Zimbabwe's foreign policy converge in the person who is the Head of government and the administrative structure controlled by the secretary of the president. The Head of Government becomes the focal point for decision-making and overseeing their implementation. Critics have noted that such a position reflects an undemocratic way of governing as power is vested in an individual with no checks and balances, hence the tendency for a dictatorial system of governance. However, a number of actors are involved in the foreign policy making process and they range from government ministries, to civil society groups, academia and political parties. These play a role in the policy formulation and implementation with their roles being dependent on which sphere they operate from, i.e.

either political, economic, socio-cultural or security. Patel has noted that Robert Mugabe, the head of state and government, is an intellectual, and has an abiding and deep interest in foreign and global issues, hence has to be visible rather than being passive in foreign policy issues in Zimbabwe.⁵

Contrary to the criticism that foreign policy making in Zimbabwe has not been democratic, Engels observes that foreign policy formation has not been a closed one. It has indeed been partly open to competitive societal inputs.⁶ An example can be drawn from political parties and civil society groups that are affected negatively by the land distribution and those concerned with governance issues. To some extent, it also takes into consideration external demands largely from Britain and other countries, and other organizations concerned with land issue in Zimbabwe. An example is the Abuja Agreement of 6 September 2001 in which Zimbabwe had to comply with conditions that there be no further farm occupations and also speed up de-listing of farms that do not meet set criteria among other conditions.

Britain-Zimbabwe Relations in Perspective

Much of the post-independence literature on bilateral relations between Zimbabwe and Britain has been neglected. The reasons stem from the fact that many aspects of the relationship were familiar since the British agenda at Lancaster won the day by inserting safeguards in the constitution and that the Commonwealth provided a multilateral form rather than bilateral contacts between Zimbabwe and Britain.⁷ Tracing the relations between these countries, it emerges that Britain through acts of commission and omission has necessitated the consolidation of white minority hegemony both before and after independence. The souring of relations between Zimbabwe and Britain over the land issue did not neither begin in the late 1990s nor have the debates changed from the concerns of the period immediately after independence.

During the 1980s, differences arose regularly between the Zimbabwean Government and the UK administration about the funding of land redistribution. The bone of contention was the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the British government to provide funds for the purchase of commercial farmland for distribution as outlined in the Lancaster House agreement. Such

sentiments were a result of commitment expressed by British Foreign Minister, Geoffrey Home, to Zimbabwe's Foreign Affairs Minister Witness Mangwende in 1980 acknowledging that "...Her Majesty's government is now willing to be more flexible with regard to the release of funds to be used in the land acquisition and development"⁸.

Despite this commitment from British authorities there have been changes and inconsistency on this position by successive British Governments. A letter from the British Government, Department of International Development (DFID) in 1997 shows how the current crisis in Zimbabwe externally, as it concerns Anglo- Zimbabwe relations was borne. According to Stan Mudenge, Zimbabwe's Foreign Affairs Minister, this led the Zimbabwean Government to resort to a policy of compulsorily acquiring land after the new Labour government under Tony Blair had reneged on the Lancaster House obligation to (financially) assist Zimbabwe's land reform.⁹ An appraisal of the letter clearly shows how the problem started. It gives the background to the problem especially in relation to efforts by the Zimbabwean Government to resolve the land problem based on past agreements.

Kenneth Kaunda, former Zambian president, has noted that both Britain and Zimbabwe can be blamed for failing to discuss the land issue. He noted that he was surprised to see that all the parties remained mute on the matter until 1997.¹⁰ Certainly, the British and the Zimbabwean Government did not act on time, given the historical significance of land in Zimbabwe. It is true that procedurally, based on the understanding reached at Lancaster, the land issue was to be discussed ten years after independence but it appears no party from either side made serious commitment to follow up on the issue up until the problem got to crisis levels in the second half of the 1990s.

However, investigations reveal that Zimbabwe has very much made a gesture to invite Britain at this conference table for almost a decade, waiting for Cook and those before him, to no avail. It is the British government that spurned and frustrated such a dialogue for years and who must, also, bear responsibility for the recent consequences of reneging on the proposed negotiations.¹¹ Britain stands accused of consigning the matter to the pending tray for too long. It is on record that a number of requests were made by the Zimbabwean Government for almost ten

years since 1992 to reopen the issue with a view to a permanent solution, but successive British governments have somehow managed to fend off such dialogue.

The British government under Prime Minister Blair completely refused to come to terms with the Zimbabwean government on the land issue preferring to dictate and adopt a completely new understanding. The actions by the British Government unquestionably invoked reactions from Zimbabwe. The view that the new Labour government wanted to look for a new basis for relations with the Commonwealth countries, which basis had no bearing on the past was a fundamental policy error given the understanding at Lancaster House Conference at which the British played the role of mediator and made an undertaking for responsibility towards the resolution of the land problem.

It is important for the Labour government to admit its own wrongs. Being fair, honest, open and willing to admit to having made mistakes can help in resolving the land issue and it should explain to people, not only in Britain but the world over its historical obligations vis-à-vis the Zimbabwean crisis. However, it should also be noted that Zimbabwe also has its fair share of blame stemming from policy blunders regarding its relations with Britain from 1980 to around 1996. For instance, it cannot be contested that Zimbabwe's foreign policy focus before the turn of the millennium only derived short-term benefits, especially political expediency at a huge price for the nation.

Internationally, Zimbabwe seems to have put a wedge between EU and ACP to mobilize support in its struggle to free the land. It must be borne in mind that this kind of behavior will do more harm not only to Zimbabwe, but also to those ACP countries that will want to enlist help from the West. Above all, it will make co-operation amongst the developed and the developing countries difficult.

At the local political level, it is difficult to dispute that ZANU (PF) desires to keep a stranglehold on power at all costs. As Diana Mitchell noted, Mugabe's outburst that he was fighting for the white farmers to get their money was cheap *politicking*.¹² It is apparent that as Zimbabwe approached the new millennium, Mugabe was facing a serious waning of political

fortunes as evidenced by the rejection of a government-sponsored draft constitution in February 2000 and the subsequent gain of a significant number of votes by the then 9 month opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party in the 2000 general elections. Hence there was urgent need on the part of Zanu (PF) to administer a land reform program that would enable his survival especially by securing the rural vote, which translates to the majority vote given Zimbabwe's demographic realities. Such views have dominated the domestic politics of Zimbabwe, especially with the emergence of a strong opposition political party MDC which strongly feels, believes and maintains that the fast track land reform policy by the current government is a political gimmick meant to divert the suffering masses' attention from the real macro-economic crisis affecting the nation.

The Government and the ruling party in Zimbabwe blame the international community in general and Britain, the ex-colonial power, in particular for the breakdown in the negotiated process of land reform. The preference of donors for a redistribution process founded on market principles placed obstacles for a rapid progress in redistributing the land. Further, with Britain's failure to resume funding of the land reform the net result was the creation of a law and order vacuum, which was exploited by the veterans of Zimbabwe's guerrilla style liberation struggle who could not even approve of any attempt to reverse the land redistribution exercise. This led to a formidable alliance of some members of the international community, led by Britain, locally represented by white commercial farmers and opposition political party MDC in Zimbabwe. The net result was what later turned out to be a fatal politicization and tragic internationalization of the land issue. Thus, all these actors have had a role to play in intensifying the conflict.

What remains lucid, irrespective of Mugabe's alleged undemocratic rule and disregard for the rule of law is whether Britain will acknowledge its historical role in the Zimbabwe land crisis and its failure to fulfill agreements made in 1979 at Lancaster. As the former colonial master, Britain must take a leading position on issues that it partly created during the decolonisation process in an apparent attempt to maintain her deep-seated interests. Britain must free herself from an imperial outlook that has tended to undermine her image given the stark reality of her past role in Southern African colonial history.

With the announcement by the Government of Zimbabwe in 2003 that the fast track land reform was over, successfully implemented and in fact done with, William Nhara is correct to note that Britain has since lost the game.¹³ The actual fact is that Britain failed to conceptualize the critical issues on the land problem in Zimbabwe. According to Nhara, the British Government's policy move towards Zimbabwe was based on intelligence services, which suggested that Mugabe would drop the land reform policy and be tied to the donors especially given the economic problems that Zimbabwe is facing.¹⁴

Britain fears that her commitment to fund land reform in Zimbabwe will spark a series of demands from former colonies, thus leading to loss of support both at home and externally from other allies who have basically the same obligation as Britain in their former colonies. Following action taken in Zimbabwe, demands for compensation for colonial injustices, but all emanating from land alienation have since emerged in Namibia, South Africa, Kenya and Australia and Brazil. This means that the West has the moral duty to pay not just compensation to white farmers, but also Africans who have for years been deprived of valuable resources through colonialism. From the foregoing, it must be borne in mind that sooner or later, the colonial wrongs have to be corrected all over post-colonial states because they are ticking time bombs. Colonial injustice will be corrected by giving land not only to Zimbabweans whose land was alienated for 110 years, but also to the rest of countries in Africa and the Third World who went through the grueling colonial process.

If white and black people of Africa and the entire third world are to live peacefully and harmoniously in future, the West must stop presenting white people especially from the west as saviours of black people using arguments that paint white citizens of Africa as either more able technically or less corrupt morally. There is need for Western countries especially Britain and the United States to desist from championing the issues of human rights, rule of law and governance especially narrowly defining these terms in terms of their own national interest. This will result in conflict of values between nations leading to antagonism and consequent decline of relations. Politics is about compromise and negotiations rather than self-interest that often leads to conflict and war where human rights and respect of the rule of law will be negatively affected.

The land issue in Zimbabwe has proved the formidable challenges former colonies face in fighting colonial legacies further showing how this in turn affects a wide range of international actors. The September 1998 international donor conference in Zimbabwe showed the need for a number of global actors in finding a workable land solution. The three day conference in Harare which had representatives from the various UN agencies, the IMF, World Bank, the EU and twenty foreign governments including Britain, the US, China and Cuba along with local delegates from the Commercial Farmers Union, Non Governmental Organisations, civic groups and stakeholders drew up a new economic programme. The agreement reached was that land redistribution was imperative. This seems to have given Britain and other delegates to the conference the confidence that the Zimbabwean government was to stick to the dictates of the donors who wanted to drag the whole program. It appears that the actors failed to take heed of Mugabe's warning that if the donor community failed to back the plan of immediately resettling the landless majority, the people of Zimbabwe would resettle themselves in any way they deem necessary, a situation that ironically prevailed two years later with the so-called farm invasions. This has led to strong speculation that the government masterminded the invasions that took place in early 2002.

The overwhelming success of Zimbabwe over Britain emerged with conclusions reached in Abuja. The conclusion of the meeting of the Committee of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers on Zimbabwe, Abuja, Nigeria, 6 September 2001 noted that the issue of land was at the core of the crisis in Zimbabwe and the programme of land reform was therefore, crucial to the resolution of the problem. Another success is that the land problem had a political and rule of law dimension and most important of all, that Britain should contribute financially towards the land reform. It was a victory for Zimbabwe as it allowed Britain to act as a partner in the land reform process, and that the process was to continue with international support.

However, irrespective of Mugabe's successes, Britain managed to stand on its views on Zimbabwe by managing to bring technically appealing issues of human rights, rule of law, transparency and governance as the issues that had to be considered in settling the land problem. Such issues became central to evaluating the land reform process.

Dimensions to the Conflict

The deterioration of relations is reflected in a number of spheres of interaction between the two countries. The diplomatic community was largely affected as their interaction continues to depict a state of conflict and direct confrontation. There was altercation between government officials and the High Commission and embassies involved. These incidences involved, firstly, the opening of the diplomatic bag with Harare accusing the British High Commission of failure to observe international law as it had refused to describe the contents of the bag. Peter Hain, Britain's Junior Foreign Minister, received this with bitterness and remarked, "... this is not the act of a civilised country".¹⁵ The whole incident seems to have been started by Britain who wanted to spoil Zimbabwe's image in the watchful eyes of the international community so as to justify that there was no rule of law and that Mugabe's government was acting in a manner contrary to international law hence the need for punishment by the international community.

Secondly, the deportation of Joseph Winter, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) correspondent in Zimbabwe further intensified friction. This resulted in Roger Hazelwood, a British diplomat being summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to explain his actions concerning interference with security forces that were on duty to serve deportation papers on the BBC correspondent. This incident, coupled with many other of a like manner, led to the Zimbabwe government being labeled an enemy of press freedom, which is against the fundamental principle of democracy.

Again in diplomatic circles, the major issue has been the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth and the imposition of targeted sanctions by the European Union and US. Britain had led the campaign on both multilateral institutions to have Zimbabwe isolated. These acts by Britain were meant to transform an otherwise bilateral issue to a multilateral one so as to gain support of those countries that might also be affected by the same situation for example Australia, New Zealand and other former colonial powers. The call for land in Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, by the Aborigines in Australia and the Maori in New Zealand gave the evidence to the likelihood of the land issue taking a global dimension and affecting the relations of many states.

The gospel by Britain for Zimbabwe's expulsion and the call for sanctions on Zimbabwe was widespread. This led Stan Mudenge, the Zimbabwean Foreign Affairs Minister, to announce that those holding the view that Zimbabwe should be isolated internationally were free to close their embassies in Harare and leave.¹⁶ However, irrespective of such calls not so much was seen as regards the closure of embassies nor is to be witnessed in the near future. This should be attributed to the strong ties and a very long-standing relationship that largely depicts interdependence. Thus the effects of the sanctions did not penetrate deeper with Zimbabwean officials managing to attend meetings both in Europe and USA. For example, Mugabe made trips to Belgium and France on 5th and 6th March 2001 and managed to attend a UN session in New York the same year.

The Anglo- Zimbabwe relations have had adverse effects upon co-operation amongst countries especially between the West and the former colonised states. The failure to reach an agreement in 2002 between the EU-ACP countries on the issue of Zimbabwe led to the failed negotiations that were aimed at enhancing co-operation and development through partnership. Given this environment it also remains to be seen how the new initiative, New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) is likely to perform on the ground as it is largely dependent on closer co-operation between African countries and the west.

Personal exchanges of words and vitriol have largely continued between the leaders of the two nations. Mugabe has continued to make reference at almost every opportunity to the British Prime Minister, Antony Blair, as an immature little man employing the services of gay gangster. On the other hand, the British authorities have continued to label Mugabe a dictator, irrational and inhuman. Such depicts the confrontation being spread to personalities of the leaders hence deepening the crisis.

In economic circles Zimbabwe has suffered. Despite denial by Britain over allegations of sabotaging fuel deliveries to Zimbabwe some evidence exist that a British Oil Company with heavy connection to the labour government had been working financially to dissuade oil merchants from supplying fuel. According to Daily News report,

“British Petroleum Company, whose name I will not disclose approached our main supplier Independent Petroleum Group and offered high cash inducements... A particular ship called British Admiral which was docked at Beira was a victim of heavy lobbying by the petroleum company.”¹⁷

Amid fuel shortages that continue to haunt Zimbabwe such reports bear semblance of truth. However, such view ought to be taken with a full comprehension that the fuel problem in Zimbabwe has its domestic dimension that relates to acute and perennial shortage of forex and the mismanagement that has existed at National Oil Company of Zimbabwe for a long time.

Trade between the two countries dropped. According to British authorities this was due to the decline of exports caused by farm invasions, as 68% of the exports were agricultural goods.¹⁸ However, this decline was not only in terms of exports but also imports showing that it was not only an issue of farm invasions but also a range of other issues that characterized the relations of these countries.

Suggestions aid to the Government of Zimbabwe should be stopped because there is good evidence that it gets stolen and also used to sustain Mugabe’s appalling actions seem not to have happened on the ground. UK remains the largest aid donor via the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) and the second largest trading partner. Peter Longworth, the UK official, in an interview admitted that there was no intention to cut aid.

Despite Mugabe’s remarks, not much financial support has come from friends elsewhere. Ironically the bulk of the \$20 million so far donated to the WFP aid plan has come from the UK and the US. According to the Department for International Development (DFID) the flow of aid to Zimbabwe has not declined. The existing figures show the targets and plans that funding has actually increased rather than declined. According to an official with the DFID aid has increased from 12 million pounds in 2000 to 18 million in 2001 and to 23 million pounds in 2002.¹⁹ Largely, much of this has been used in supplementary feeding projects rather than developmental programmes. This has been a move to justify that the land reform program has not achieved any objectives of insuring adequacy in food security in the country. This is true given the remarks by

the British High commissioner to Zimbabwe “We understand that small farmers produce 70% of the maize crop and that they were badly hit by drought. This is not the issue. But it is mismanagement that causes a drought to be famine”²⁰

The decline of relations has had adverse effects on Zimbabwe’s economy. Foreign direct investment into Zimbabwe declined between 1998 and 2001 and the country is now ranked a top 8 economies in the world with the least potential to attract investors. According to World Investment Report 2002, published by the United Nations conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) inflows into Zimbabwe declined from a peak of US\$5 million in 2001.²¹ Specifically, the number of companies from Britain investing in Zimbabwe declined at a faster rate.

On the military forum Britain decided to recall its team of military trainers seconded to the Zimbabwean army and the announcement by Britain to place embargo on arms and military equipment on Zimbabwe were part of the Labour government’s commitment to following an ethical foreign policy. However, there was no commitment on the side of Britain to effect its sanctions and business took precedence over the need for sanctioning Zimbabwe. For example, Tony Blair came under criticism for giving the go-ahead to selling of spares for Hawk jets to Zimbabwe.²² This questions the commitment of Britain’s Labour governments to the criticism of Zimbabwe’s appalling record on human rights, economic mismanagement, government corruption and abuse of aid and the desire to sanction it.

In the field of aviation Britain threatened to ban Zimbabwe’s official airline, Air Zimbabwe from entering its country because of rampant smuggling of contraband by its staff. This led to the Flight Operation Manager issuing notice 34/98 to all captains.²³ However, such actions were more of a business nature dealing with the immigration laws rather than an outcome of the souring of relations between Zimbabwe and Britain especially their stand off on the land issue.

Conclusion

Foreign policy making in Zimbabwe reveals that the domestic policy plays an important role in shaping its relations amongst other nations. Land and sovereignty are core principles of Zimbabwe's foreign policymaking and have a bearing on its interaction and actions. It remains that foreign policy making in Zimbabwe is the cornerstone and predictable and will remain confrontational to the west rather than acceptance to its imposition until probably the change of regime.

Both the external and internal environment plays an important role in foreign policy making process. Largely, it emerges that the process involves omni-balancing both environments, but for Zimbabwe just like most African states the domestic plays a much more important role. Domestic policy reflects the national socio-political and economic structures, which underlie the relationship between the antagonistic social forces constituted by their socio-economic system.

The relations between Zimbabwe and Britain have largely arisen from the failure by both sides to negotiate the process of land redistribution in Zimbabwe. What emerges from the conflict between the two countries is that it has been a result of pursuance of divergent national interest. It has to be borne in mind that conflict is inherent in every society and disagreements always crop up when interest differs. But hysterical abuse, personalisation of issues and demonisation of those involved compounds the problem. Both actors, that is, Britain and Zimbabwe should restart their relationship through constructive engagement that fosters confidence building.

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Notes

¹ This is a term that has originated and widely used by Daniel Papp see (International Relations, Macmillan, New York 1984, p, 243)

² Speech delivered by the Secretary for foreign Affairs, Ambassador A. Chigwedere , at the University of Zimbabwe Workshop: 17 June 1993. Topic: Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy in the 1990s

² <http://www.gta.gov.zw/foreign%affairs/Executive%20summary%20FA.html>

⁴ Speech delivered by the Secretary for foreign Affairs, Abbasador A. Chigwedere , at the University of Zimbabwe Workshop: 17 June 1993. Topic: Zimbabwe’s Foreign Policy in the 1990s

⁵ Hasu H Patel, No Master, No Mortgage, No Sale : The Foreign Policy of Zimbabwe, CREU Harare 1987, p, 9.

⁶ Ulf Engels, The Foreign Policy of Zimbabwe, Institute of African Affairs, Hamburg 1994.

⁷ Richard Schwartz, Coming to Terms: Zimbabwe in the International Arena, IB Tauris publishers London, 2001.

⁸ Witness Magwende quoted in Ulf Engels, Opicit.

⁹ <http://www.gta.gov.zw/foreign%affairs/Executive%20summary%20FA.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.africaonline.com/st/Articles/1,3,40559.jsp>

¹² William Nhara, “Britain lost battle against Zimbabwe” The Sunday Mail, 4 August 2002.

¹³ William Nhara, “Britain lost battle against Zimbabwe” The Sunday Mail, 4 August 2002.

¹⁵ The Reporter, Standard, 18 August 2000, p, 8.

¹⁶ The Daily News 16 March 2001.

¹⁶ Tracy Munaku “Fuel: Britain Denies Claims” Daily News 6 June 2000.

¹⁸ Chris Gande Trade with the UK not hit by strained relations” Daily News 21 February 2001

¹⁹ <http://www.theindependent.co.zw/news/2002/April/Friday12/analysis.html>

²⁰ BHC, Britain and Zimbabwe, Issue Number 10, October 2002, British High Commission Harare, p, 3.

²¹ <http://allafrica.com/stories/200209190316.html>.

²² http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/611783.stm

²³ Independent Reporter, ‘Britain Threatens to ban Air Zimbabwe flights’, Independent, 8 January 1999, p, 3.

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