

Lessons From Zim Elections

RECENT events and subsequent elections in Zimbabwe have been adjudged as disreputable with the international community's expectations nipped in the bud. These expectations were preemptive and the events farcical pointing to the usurping of state power.

All along the writing was on the wall. What better a way to signal pending outcome than the failure of the Commonwealth to suspend Zimbabwe from this honourable club? Now that the election results are out and Dr Mugabe has won another six-year presidential mandate, there is going to be contest and jostling. Not that he will lose much sleep. That there will be walk and talk, both in the popular press and courts of law is inevitable. Lest I be prophesying, let me put some flesh on the bone.

I hail from Kenya, an African Commonwealth member that had had the nascent occasion of holding multiparty elections that were marred and fraught with all degeneracy that may accompany elections gone haywire, making the Zimbabwean experience look like an act from the Vatican. This was in 1992 and 1997 respectively, when President Moi won in both instances, enduring a tight reign on power that he has stretched to 24 years, two better than Mugabe. Kenya goes to elections again this year. What happened in these two elections was worse than Zimbabwe. Presidents Moi and Mugabe are two of a kind; they are the most unpopular leaders who rule agricultural states that were formerly British colonies. They are birds of the same feather, with Moi presiding over the most gross human rights violations ever witnessed in post-colonial Kenya, arming and instigating the now infamous tribal clashes that pitted one tribe against the other (ethnic cleansing), causing massive family displacement, loss of life and property.

Then as it is now in Zimbabwe, there was a massive hullabaloo hanging in the tense post-election air. Many sensed the dethroning of the incumbent by a mysterious hand concocted by the adverse

predictions of the West press was nigh. Nothing happened. Naturally, a lot of things came to pass other than the necessary change of guard. Seizing on this stay and to the chagrin of many, Kenya's 1992 first multiparty elections were a handy lesson for Moi who fortified his power base and became wary of 'free and fair' elections, and the opposition that he now pulverises with sheer contempt.

Like Mugabe to Tony Blair, he taunted and dared the West to step out of the shadows of petty criticism, firing carelessly from the hip. Then, as it shall be, dust settled. We have been this way before. My fascination is the direction all this is headed to. Has the International community learnt from the past cases? Is it not quintessential to create a situation that takes cognisance of the uniqueness of the African condition?

As an African whose country has colonial ties with Britain, I hesitate to join the emerging school of thought theorising that utilitarian Western democracy, is not totally strange to Africa, yet still it may not deliver. Why? Because it should be user-considerate and -friendly. I stand to be corrected that the West projects a double-faced approach when it is faced with a choice between democratic principles and self-interest. Take this scenario: If Mugabe forthwith renounces unlawful land seizures, the West will fete him as a visionary who has come in from the cold. But will he? He has been feted before and feels personally betrayed, almost cast into political oblivion before clinging to the last saving grace, the land issue. Like a snake hunter, he now strikes the head and sees the pain resonate beyond Zimbabwe. He persists and he is not about to let go.

If the elections are anything to go by, Mugabe, like any other despotic leader, has followers, albeit few, who dignify him. He and his clique are not unduly disquieted by sanctions - their effectiveness having diminished immensely of late. Subsequently, the

masses cannot cause a revolution, as power, in form of the military, is controlled by the top brass. For the masses they may care less, as economic torment may never improve their lot beyond what it has been for years.

But what is it that now concerns the West about Zimbabwe's economy, and not the other African lot, if cases like Kenya's is anything to go by? That the Western media and governments had a deeply subjective interest in Morgan Tsvangirai upstaging Mugabe leaves a lot to be desired. In a nutshell, it is Mugabe's illegal land grab from the white Zimbabweans. But alas, the masses anticipate radical land policy change and egged on, throw caution to the wind, if there was any at all. Unaware, they receive blows not meant for them.

Soberly, the best way ahead is to try to allay tempers raised at home and abroad by seeking to solve the land issue peacefully and in a manner calculated to attract assistance from as many international forces as possible. Hard as it may seem, the immediate remedy is for the West to let Africa solve her own problems, just as the continent's election observers have indicated by breaking away from Western anticipated verdict: that there was nothing manifest to bill the elections fraudulent. Or maybe it is a new era for the long neglected continent to go its own way, after long sessions of exploitation, betrayal and being told what to do. Just maybe. Threatening hardship is a heartless way of telling one to change

especially when such punitive measures are felt by innocent citizens. I think balanced dialogue and democracy are good bedfellows, if only applied judiciously and used for the common good, than serving parochial vested interests. For the soul of Zimbabwe we wish for peace and healing, just once again.

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