Mugabe, Mbeki & the Politics of Anti-Imperialism

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There can be little doubt that one of the most significant aspects of the current crisis in Zimbabwe, especially the events of the past two or three years, has been its international character. At the heart of President Robert Mugabe’s offensive against the array of forces opposed to his rule are repeated attempts to place the Zimbabwe problem at the centre of a larger anti-imperialist and Pan-African position. These tactics have been crucial to the process of legitimising the recent actions of ZANU-PF, in power since independence in 1980. The land question in particular has been located within a discourse of legitimate redress for colonial injustice, language which has resonated on the African continent, and within the Third World more generally. Knowing that his authoritarian rule would be confronted with a widespread national and international critique centred on property rights, human rights and the rule of law, Mugabe and his advisors constructed alternative discourses around the need for renewed liberation struggle solidarity, the continuing effects of African marginalisation attendant on the globalisation process, and the presumptions of liberal imperialism. Behind this rhetorical shield, the ZANU-PF government has effectively suspended the rule of law as it attempts to bludgeon its opponents into silence. In doing so, it has enjoyed the support provided by the so-called ‘quiet diplomacy’ and ‘constructive engagement’ of other Southern and Central African governments.

Yet for all of the many successes that these actions have enjoyed, they have received very little detailed attention. The focus of recent books, articles and position papers has invariably been on the internal and economic dynamics of the Zimbabwean crisis, whether seen as driven by megalomania and corruption (Blair, 2002; Meredith, 2002), the end result of unsustainable policies aggravated by structural adjustment and globalisation (Jenkins & Knight, 2002; Chan, 2003) or an admixture of both (Bond & Manyanya, 2002; Campbell, 2003). But while these features are obviously vital components of the tragedy unfolding in Zimbabwe, as indeed the present authors have argued elsewhere (Raftopoulos & Phimister, forthcoming), it is clear that its international dimension is no less important. In what follows, the course of anti-imperialism, rhetorically if not in reality, pursued by Zimbabwe’s government is first plotted against the background of 9/11 and ‘new’ or ‘liberal’ imperialism, before tracing its intersection with pan-African and Third World sympathies. The last section pays detailed attention to the role played by South Africa, as the support of President Thabo Mbeki has all along been crucial for the survival of Mugabe’s regime.
Mugabe & Anti-imperialism

Once Mugabe and ZANU-PF embarked on the land occupation exercise, especially where it was accompanied by violations of property rights and the rule of law, it was clear that the major western powers, led by the British government, would not let the matter pass without criticism. Following parliamentary and presidential elections in 2000 and 2002 respectively which were widely regarded as neither free nor fair, and against a background of violent land seizures, the EU and the US imposed targeted sanctions on the ruling party. In 2002 Zimbabwe was also suspended from the Commonwealth for one year, during which time a troika comprising the heads of state of South Africa, Nigeria and Australia, sought to persuade Mugabe and his government of the need to restore democracy to Zimbabwe. When no agreement could be reached over what progress if any had been made, Zimbabwe’s suspension from the Commonwealth was controversially extended, an impasse culminating with Harare’s abrupt withdrawal from what it termed ‘a white racist club’ (Sunday Times, 7 December 2003).

By way of reaction to Western opposition, Mugabe long ago set out to erect a barrier of anti-imperialist solidarity around his domestic political project. He has done so to remarkable effect. By defining the Zimbabwean crisis as one of anti-colonial redress and land redistribution, Mugabe very skilfully set the parameters of the subsequent debate. This has certainly been the case in Africa, but also to a significant degree in the wider world as well. In doing so, he has been helped at every stage by clumsy Western, particularly British, intervention. The initial damage done in 1997 by ‘new’ Labour’s arrogant denial of any responsibility for past colonial injustices in Zimbabwe, was hugely compounded by the Blair government’s subsequent embrace of so-called ‘liberal imperialism’. Taking their cue from conservative American thinking after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, in which the ‘war on terrorism’ was cast as one between the ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’ worlds, British assumptions were no less sweeping for all that they were expressed somewhat less bluntly (Bowden, 2001:28-46; Moore, 2003:112-31). First articulated in a series of Foreign Office position papers and latterly in articles and books, liberal imperialism seeks to bring ‘order and organisation’ to the chaotic world of ‘failed states’. Acknowledging that ‘amongst ourselves we keep the law but when we are operating in the jungle we must also use the laws of the jungle’, advocates of liberal imperialism envisage ‘a world in which the efficient and well-governed export stability and liberty’. What could be more desirable than a ‘new kind of imperialism’ to complement the ‘voluntary imperialism’ of established institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank already providing ‘help to states wishing to find their way back into the global economy and into the virtuous circle of investment and prosperity’? (Robert Cooper, 2002; 2003). Certainly nothing that could be envisaged by a British prime minister whose disingenuous pursuit of moral certainty would become a cause of mounting concern as he cast about for reasons to make war on Iraq (Williams, 2001). Addressing a somewhat bemused Labour Party Conference three weeks after 9/11, and vacuously invoking the ‘moral power of a world acting as a community’, Blair boasted that Britain would play a leading role in re-ordering the globe in order to bring the ‘values of democracy and freedom to people around the world’. That these values would be given definition by the United States and Britain acting unilaterally went without saying. Joined to American military muscle, liberal imperialism now had the capacity to enforce regime change (London Review of Books, 6 June 2002; Meiksins Wood, 2003).
Not surprisingly, this vision of a future reshaped in American and British interests was not one widely shared beyond Washington and Whitehall. Denounced by many non-Western governments and intellectuals, it has provided crucial additional cover for the Mugabe regime. While the doctrine of liberal imperialism was obviously never formulated specifically with Zimbabwe in mind, its implications were lost on neither friend nor foe. After a brief period of cynically justifying its attacks on domestic opponents as part of a global campaign against ‘terrorism’, during which time Zimbabwe’s government-controlled media breathlessly reported anthrax threats to Parliament and the establishment of M[ovement] D[emocratic] C[hoice] ‘killer houses’ (The Chronicle, 9 February 2002; The Herald, 20 February 2002), the state opted to hide repression behind the language of anti-imperialism. It is this latter vocabulary which Mugabe and his supporters have employed at every opportunity. That it is not entirely devoid of truth has helped considerably. Nor has it lost anything in being retold to domestic and regional audiences. A lengthy ‘opinion’ piece in the government-controlled Herald newspaper, for example, placed British antagonism towards Zimbabwe squarely in the context of an attempted return to colonialism. Quoting extensively from articles which had appeared in the London press, as well as from subsequent speeches by Blair, The Herald treated its readers to an account of how and why Britain ‘wants to maintain [its] stranglehold on Harare’. ‘The imperial intentions [of the British] began to manifest themselves when the Government decided to embark on a fast track land resettlement programme’, explained the paper:

In order to safeguard the interests of their kith and kin in the country, the British and Scandinavian countries rallied behind the formation of the opposition MDC. Their intention was to install a puppet government willing to bend to their colonial designs and adventures … However, soon … the British started showing their real colours by advocating sanctions against Zimbabwe for alleged human rights abuses. But realising the hideous intentions of the British, countries in the Southern African Development Community and the African Union supported Zimbabwe by saying that land was at the core of the problems in the country … It is not surprising to note that Tanzania, Malawi, Namibia, Mozambique, Nigeria and South Africa have all refused to succumb to bullying tactics by Britain because they are all aware of its hidden agenda to topple the present Zimbabwean government … So it is clear that the victory by Zanu-PF in the just ended presidential poll was indeed a victory against imperialism.

‘The intention of the British to recolonise Zimbabwe is not an April Fools’ joke but is real’, The Herald concluded. ‘Yet as long as Zimbabweans remain united the forces of evil will not succeed’ (The Herald, 9 April 2002).

South African audiences have been accorded much the same kind of exposition. Writing in Johannesburg’s Citizen newspaper, ZANU-PF’s secretary for information and publicity was at pains to praise President Mbeki for his solidarity with Mugabe, even as he identified the threat posed by imperialism. ‘African leaders support President Mugabe and Zanu-PF with profound understanding of colonial and imperial history’, the article began. It was the British who ‘invaded Africa, butchered those who resisted, [and] chained and shipped blacks for slavery … Today they are in Iraq murdering for oil. Genocide and pillage are core values that sustain British and American societies’. Africans wanted to know how such a past could be squared with ‘new found Western democracy, good governance, respect for the rule of law and upholding of human rights?’ All that Zimbabweans were taking was ‘their land from racist white invaders without paying a cent’. As the British were
‘worse than the devil preached in Anglican churches’, surely ‘Zanu-PF is doing justice to end colonial and imperial dream[s]’ (Citizen, 2 October 2003).

Best of all at making these points has been Mugabe himself. Addressing the World Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2002, he shrewdly caught the mood of most developing-world leaders by presenting his land policies as part of a continuing struggle against colonialism in whatever guise. To loud applause, Mugabe proclaimed Zimbabwe’s determination ‘to shed our blood’ in defence of its hard-won independence. ‘We are not Europeans. We have not asked for any inch of Europe, any square inch of that territory. So Blair, keep your England and let me keep my Zimbabwe!’ (The Star, 2 September 2002). Five months later, Zimbabwe’s president broadened his field of fire to attack imperialism more generally. At the Non-Aligned Movement Summit held in Kuala Lumpur at the end of February 2003, Mugabe condemned the ‘war-like disposition ... of the new imperialism’. ‘The United States, awakened to the implications of being the sole superpower, joined by Britain as a born-again colonialist’, declared the erstwhile hero of the Second Chimurenga, ‘... have turned themselves into fierce hunting bulldogs raring to go, as they sniff for more blood, Third World blood’. Warming to his task, Mugabe warned Britain against attempting ‘to undermine the sovereignty of my country and introduce neo-colonialist rule’. But this Blair would never achieve, Mugabe assured his appreciative audience, especially given ‘your consistent support and solidarity with Zimbabwe’. His greatest scorn, though, was reserved for what he and his audience perceived as the West’s hypocrisy. Liberal imperialism’s insistence that the post-modern world would ‘need to get used to the idea of double standards’, that is, working within the law in the West, while employing ‘force, pre-emptive attack, deception, what ever is necessary for the rest’, was neatly turned on its head: ‘no longer willing to subject ... [its] actions to international law, rationality or the force of morality’, the United States had one yardstick for its own behaviour and one for the Third World (New African, April 2003). ‘Is it not ironical that Mr Bush who was not really elected should deny my legitimacy, the legitimacy of President Mugabe, established by many observer groups from Africa and the Third World?’ asked Mugabe. ‘Who, in these circumstances, should the world impose sanctions on? Robert Mugabe or George Bush?’ (Cape Times, 25 February 2003; Campbell, 2003:309).

Where necessary, essentialised notions of Third World and African vs. European and North American identities were drawn upon in attempts to ward off mounting pressure from the United States. The fact that the most stinging criticism of the Mugabe regime’s abuse of human rights came from the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, himself an African American, imparted particular venom to Harare’s invective. By way of preparing the ground for President Bush’s whistle stop African tour, towards the end of June 2003 Powell had set out his thoughts in a lengthy article for the New York Times. Describing Mugabe and the ZANU-PF politburo as tyrants without ‘legitimacy or moral authority’, Powell praised the bravery of ordinary Zimbabweans, even as he warned that Mugabe’s ‘reckless governmental mismanagement and unchecked corruption’ would ‘drag Zimbabwe down until there is nothing left to ruin’ (New York Times, 24 June 2003). In a response which seemingly deliberately echoed remarks made the previous year by the entertainer and political activist, Harry Belafonte, to the effect that Powell ‘adopted a docile mien to preserve his status’, Powell was pilloried as a ‘self-effacing servant of his white masters’. This time the attack was led by Jonathan Moyo, Zimbabwe’s Information Minister, with Mugabe keeping an uncharacteristically low profile. The US Secretary of State was ‘a crude international outlaw’ whose claim that the land
reform scheme had ‘chiefly benefited [party] loyalists, military officers, or their wives and friends’ was an outright lie. As reported in the South African press, Moyo declared that Powell had betrayed the aspirations of his fellow blacks by aligning himself with Bush’s right-wing administration. Powell was ‘a disgraceful Uncle Tom who always sang his master’s voice to the detriment of social justice and the rights of people of colour’. That no one should be in any doubt that Zimbabwe was only being singled out because it was the next target of ‘liberal imperialism’, Moyo added for good measure that the ‘use of lies and deception by Powell and Bush has not worked in Iraq where he wanted to mix it with oil. Nobody in ZANU-PF will ever join Powell and his kind in selling out’ (Natal Mercury, 2 July 2003; The Herald, 26 June 2003).

**Mugabe & Mbeki**

The language of anti-imperialism has played particularly well in the Southern African region. Amongst Mugabe’s most vociferous supporters has been the Namibian president, Sam Nujoma. At the World Summit held in Johannesburg last year, it was Nujoma who fired the opening shots against Britain and other former colonial powers, blaming them for Africa’s underdevelopment and poverty. Describing Africa as the ‘global underdog’, he attributed Zimbabwe’s problems entirely to the neo-colonialist agenda of the British government. ‘Here in Southern Africa we have one problem’, claimed Nujoma. ‘Blair is here ... the man who went out to campaign for sanctions against Zimbabwe while the British owned 80 percent of Zimbabwe’s land’. The EU should mend its ways, warned Namibia’s president, or suffer the consequences of being misled by Britain. Otherwise it might find itself facing sanctions from the African Union. ‘The British didn’t bring any piece of land from England to Zimbabwe’, insisted Nujoma a year later. ‘So why should Blair be allowed to deceive the world by saying that the British had the right to have the land there?’ (The Star, 2 September; New African, November 2003; The Post, 20 December 2003).

Much more importantly, indeed crucially, Mugabe retained the support of President Mbeki and the South African government. After some initial hesitation, Mbeki came out strongly in support of Mugabe. Even within the broad context outlined above, it remains far from clear precisely what combination of interests and their shifting balance over time have shaped South African policy towards Zimbabwe. Prominent amongst possible explanations are the alleged economic interests at stake; the historical ties forged during anti-colonial struggle; the defence of national sovereignty and resentment of Western pressure; hostility towards, or at best, suspicion of labour movements; and the dynamics of liberation politics generally. That South Africa has significant economic interests in Zimbabwe is obvious enough, but whether this is a sufficient explanation for Pretoria’s reluctance to criticise the present dispensation in Harare is another matter. Nonetheless, a case has been made for seeing Mbeki’s support for Mugabe and ZANU-PF as essentially a vehicle for ‘securing the economic ... interests of an emergent black South African bourgeoisie, in both the state and private sectors’. The location of the latter in both the ANC and in government energy parastatals such as Eskom and Sasol, so the argument runs, benefited hugely from successive rescue packages extended to their Zimbabwean counterparts. While this argument may well overestimate the degree of coherence and consistency in South African policy making and implementation, events in the course of 2003 added currency to its claim that ‘the attempt to forge an elitist political deal (masquerading as a consensual ‘government of national unity’).
should be seen as what it is – confirmation that Mbeki’s bottom line remains one of securing the strategic interests of South African capital whilst simultaneously consolidating his government’s role as the main African arbiter of both a regional and continental capitalist political economy’ (McKinley, 2004:362). Put another way, Bush’s condescending designation of Mbeki in July 2003 as his ‘point man’ on Zimbabwe – a description which by all accounts the South African president found flattering rather than demeaning – has as its express intention a political settlement brokered by Pretoria and acceptable to the United States (Daily News, 7 August 2003).

If the economic argument is not entirely convincing, nor is the notion that the ANC’s policy towards Mugabe turns on a profound sense of shared historical ties forged with ZANU-PF during the anti-colonial struggle. Contrary to some claims (ICG, 2002:17), these were actually far from close. The ANC’s sympathies were always with ZANU’s main rival, the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union led by Joshua Nkomo. ZANU, for its part, always supported the Pan-Africanist Congress, which was bitterly opposed to the ANC. Moreover, Harare, wary of unduly provoking the then apartheid regime, never allowed the ANC to establish military camps in Zimbabwe. There may be something in the idea that a prickly sense of national sovereignty has caused South Africa and for that matter, other countries in the Southern African sub-continent, to ignore Western demands, especially where these have been delivered in crudely hectoring tones. In a region where memories of colonial exploitation are still raw, there is no doubt that ‘new’ Labour’s selective sanctimoniousness gave particular offence. Yet even these hurt feelings were easily enough soothed, as witnessed by Bush’s successful flattery of Mbeki during his South African visit.

In fact, Mbeki’s policy towards Mugabe would seem to have much shallower historical roots than some commentators have believed, and to be considerably more contingent on domestic political forces and events than others are willing to recognise. His attitude takes full account both of the potentially unsettling precedent that would be established by an MDC government in Harare, and of the apparently widespread support for Mugabe by black South Africans. But above all, Mbeki’s support finds expression within a politics of liberation solidarity more broadly conceived than one restricted to the immediate past, albeit one which has been decisively shaped by Mugabe himself (Focus, 2002; The Guardian, 12 December 2003). It is primarily considerations of this kind that have aligned Mbeki and the ANC with Mugabe and his regime. That they have managed so far to do this with out losing Western backing, at least in public, pays testimony to South Africa’s sub-imperial significance, as well as to Mugabe’s astute appreciation of this geo-political fact.

By the close of 2002, Mbeki and the ANC had moved from a policy of so-called ‘quiet diplomacy’ towards Zimbabwe, characterised on the one hand by electricity and fuel subsidies, and on the other by occasional criticism from key individuals such as the Governor of the Reserve Bank, Tito Mboweni, to one of open endorsement of its land reform policies. Speaking in Pretoria after an official visit by ZANU-PF dignitaries in November 2002, the South African Foreign Minister, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, endorsed Mugabe’s oft-repeated claim that Britain must compensate white Zimbabwean farmers for land seized by ‘war veterans’, because after all it was the former who had benefited from land theft during the colonial era (Financial Gazette, 14 November 2002). This public display of support was further buttressed by an invitation to ZANU-PF to send a delegation to attend the ANC’s 51st national congress scheduled for the following month. At the ensuing meeting, Zuma again expressed solidarity with Mugabe. She warned the EU that the forthcoming
European Union – Africa summit would be in jeopardy if Zimbabwean government officials were excluded under the terms of sanctions imposed on supporters of the Mugabe regime. 'It's up to them [Europe] to see how they overcome the problem,' she insisted. 'It is in their court. We as Africans are ready to go. The question is, are they ready to receive us? There is no Africa that can exist without Zimbabwe. Africa is indivisible'. Mugabe could scarcely have put it any better. Certainly the ZANU-PF delegation had nothing to complain about their reception in Stellenbosch. Deliberately chosen as a venue to underscore the triumph of African nationalism, the erstwhile citadel of Afrikanerdom rang to assertions of liberation struggle and ideological solidarity. Hailing ZANU-PF as a progressive organisation, the ubiquitous Dlamini-Zuma, now wearing her hat as an ANC national executive committee member, reminded journalists that both the ANC and ZANU-PF 'fought colonialism and oppression in our countries. We liberated our countries from the yoke of colonialism and we set to improve the lives of our people in our respective countries'. The two organisations would determine their countries own destinies, 'not to be dictated to by somebody else' (Natal Mercury, 20 December 2002).

The South African government was not long in attempting to give practical expression to this policy of increasingly overt support for Mugabe and his followers. With the backing of Nigeria's President Obasanjo, Mbeki urged the Commonwealth to re-admit Zimbabwe into the Commonwealth. In February 2003, Obasanjo wrote a letter to the Australian prime minister recommending that in order to bring the Zimbabwean crisis to a speedy end the following measures should be taken: the international community should be encouraged to redeem pledges of financial assistance for the land reform process; positive engagement with Zimbabwe should be continued; the Commonwealth continues to make its good offices available for mediation between Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom. Obasanjo's recommendations were made on the basis of his, and Mbeki's assumption that a normalisation of politics had begun to return to Zimbabwe. That this was patently untrue seemed not to bother Mbeki at all. Instead, when the Commonwealth Secretary-General announced that contrary to South Africa and Nigeria's wishes, he was extending Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth, Pretoria was outraged. Its High Commissioner in London was authorised to announce that African members of the Commonwealth were all opposed to Zimbabwe's continued suspension. The South African statement argued that in the absence of Commonwealth consensus, the Secretary-General's action amounted to a 'political and procedural travesty' (Cape Argus, 21 March 2003).

The assumption behind these blatant attempts to legitimise Mugabe's authoritarian regime soon enough became clear. At a regional think-tank held near Pretoria in March 2003, senior South African officials revealed that ANC policy was predicated on the belief that Zimbabwe's government was genuinely representative. Insisting that Mugabe had been democratically elected as president, they ignored the open derision that accompanied their presentations. Far from the land reform programme having been violent and haphazard, it was proving a great success. Incredulous Zimbabweans attending the seminar were treated to moving tales of smiling peasants tilling fertile land previously held by white farmers. Nowhere in this misleading narrative were the vast swathes of previously productive farmland now lying fallow. Neither the fate of black farm workers nor the huge acreage seized by Mugabe's cronies were mentioned (The Star, 7 March 2003). Just how successful Mugabe and his supporters had been at winning the support of willing South African ministers, and more enduringly at presenting themselves as the champions of poor landless blacks, was underscored some six weeks later when Mbeki himself
portentously intervened. Writing at length in the ANC’s online publication, ANC Today, the South African president developed a line of thought first given expression by the ANC’s Secretary-General, Kgalema Motlanthe, not long after the party’s December 2002 congress. While repeating the official government line that only Zimbabweans could find solutions to their problems, Motlanthe confirmed opposition suspicions of ANC bias in favour of ZANU-PF, when he argued that Zimbabwe’s problems were not the result of the policies of one man or a rapacious elite. ‘ZANU-PF is in trouble not because it does not care about ordinary people, but because it cared too much’, he said. ‘I am not convinced that the problems in Zimbabwe can be resolved by removing Mugabe from office. The problems are much more deep-seated’, turning as they did on unsustainable social spending designed to redress the inequalities of the colonial past (The Star, 22 January 2003).

It was precisely this interpretation that Mbeki also favoured. The picture which he went on to paint of the situation in Zimbabwe was one in which a benevolent elite, committed to the poor, had failed to appreciate that the massive social expenditure characteristic of the first two decades of independence was ultimately unsustainable. ‘Contrary to what some now claim,’ Mbeki patronisingly explained, ‘the economic crisis currently affecting Zimbabwe did not originate from the desperate actions of a reckless political leadership, or from corruption. It arose from a genuine concern to meet the needs of the black poor, without taking into account the harsh economic reality that we must pay for what we consume’. Once again invoking the solidarity of the liberation struggle – ‘as patriots who occupied the same trench of struggle with Zimbabwe when we, together, battled to end white minority rule in our region’ – Mbeki argued that it was the tide of events, not ‘because there are demonic people in Harare’, which had ‘carried [Zimbabweans] ... to destinations we may not have sought’. What opponents of the regime saw as the increasingly authoritarian nature of the state and its massive abuse of human rights, Mbeki preferred to see as the inevitable consequences of the actions of well-intentioned authorities struggling with dwindling resources to contain ‘social instability as the poor respond to the pains of hunger’. In the face of global economic forces beyond its control, the Zimbabwean state would have to ‘emphasize law and order’, but this was a vicious cycle because ‘as it responds in this way, the less will it be able to address anything else other than law and order. The more it does this, the greater the absence of order and stability’.1

In making this argument, Mbeki was clearly sending a signal to those restive elements within the Tripartite Alliance (of the ANC, C[ongress] O[fficial] S[outh] A[frican] T[rade] U[nions] and the South African Communist Party) calling for a relaxation of the government’s neo-liberal economic policies, even as he bolstered his pan-Africanist credentials by supporting ZANU-PF. Indeed, if Mbeki needed any reminding of just how much support Mugabe’s policies seemingly enjoyed amongst black South Africans, it came the same month his on-line prognostications appeared when Zimbabwe’s president paid an official visit to South Africa. The occasion was the state funeral for Walter Sisulu, one of the ANC’s most revered leaders. Mugabe’s formal appearance in Soweto’s cavernous First Bank stadium was greeted with thunderous applause. His subsequent trip to Fort Hare University, his alma mater, in South Africa’s impoverished Eastern Province was no less rapturously received. Attending a graduation ceremony at which Zimbabweans were prominently represented, Mugabe ‘smiled and nodded in acknowledgement as [the university praise singer] ... described him as an “African hero” for his land policy, [and] ... called on him to “please, please chase the whites from our land”’. In a sense president Mugabe of Zimbabwe was speaking for black people worldwide
when he addressed the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg last year’, announced veteran South African journalist Harry Mashabela. ‘The pervasive venom being heaped on Mugabe from a variety of quarters in the western world ... [is] because he wouldn’t hold back the quest for more land, and refused to browbeat the war veterans as they invaded white farms’.²

With the direct and indirect support of Mbeki and the South African government, Mugabe was beyond the reach of the West. Never was this more obvious than during President Bush’s visit to South Africa in July of last year. Despite advance criticism of the Mugabe regime, not least by Powell himself, when push came to shove, neither Bush nor Powell were actually prepared to go beyond the limits preferred by Pretoria. With no vital American interests at stake and no doubt realising that any attempt to topple Mugabe risked destabilising Mbeki, the White House backed off. The South African president was left more or less free to pursue his own course. Telling Powell that it was ‘ill-advised for him to create the impression that he is directing what South Africa should do’, Mbeki, revelling in his description by Bush as ‘an honest broker’ and the ‘point man on Zimbabwe’, put a pro-Mugabe gloss on events. He not only claimed that the Zimbabwe crisis was on the way to being resolved, but that South African-sponsored talks between ZANU-PF and the MDC were already underway. Although this was simply not the case, the angry dismissal by the MDC’s leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, of Mbeki’s ‘false and misleading’ attempt to ‘shield Mugabe by buying him time’ was largely ignored. In South Africa itself, Mbeki’s ‘triumph’ was hailed by the state-controlled broadcasting services, while in Zimbabwe, the Minister of Information celebrated ‘a loud climb-down by a[n American] president all along misled’ (Sunday Times, 13 July 2003).

Emboldened by this development and further bolstered by his elevation to the deputy-presidency of the African Union, Mugabe subsequently insisted that any talks with the MDC would have to be conducted entirely on his terms. The occasion could scarcely have been more evocative of ZANU-PF’s anti-colonial and liberation struggle credentials. Addressing a Heroes Day rally just outside Harare in mid-August 2003, Mugabe insisted that ‘those [the MDC] who would go together with our enemies abroad cannot at the same time want to march alongside us as our partners. No, we say no to them, they must first repent’. The Army was lavishly praised and prudently rewarded for its role in suppressing the mass strikes and stayaways earlier in the year, and Africa’s leaders thanked for their solidarity. ‘Despite deliberate attempts by both internal and external forces to destabilise our programme, Zimbabwe has received great support from our African brothers’, he declared, ‘notably presidents Mbeki and Obasanjo in attempts to find solutions to our own challenges’ (Natal Mercury, 12 August 2003). As for the rest, ordinary Zimbabweans were left to make do with endless propaganda jingles on radio and television urging them to remain resilient: ‘rambhai nakashinga [continue to endure] – our land is our prosperity’ (Sunday Times, 3 August 2003).

This latest display of recalcitrance made it quite clear that Mugabe saw no need to compromise. Although some African voices, notably that of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu had been raised against ZANU-PF’s actions from the start (Weekend Argus, 12 January 2002), Mugabe’s fellow leaders had all along remained silent where they had not actually declared their support for him. But the first cracks in this unity now began to appear. In November 2003, Nigeria’s President Obasanjo was forced to leave Harare without securing a commitment from Mugabe and ZANU-PF to talks with the MDC. Nor was he able to find any evidence that human rights concerns had been addressed. Back in Lagos, an obviously reluctant Obasanjo
declared that Mugabe, contrary to his own confident expectation, would not be invited to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Abuja. Overshadowed by the absent Mugabe, the Abuja meeting was predictably acrimonious even as it unexpectedly confirmed Zimbabwe’s suspension, a decision which prompted Harare to announce that it was withdrawing from the Commonwealth. Insisting that the seizure of white-owned farmland was a ‘success for all of Africa’, Mugabe denounced the Commonwealth as an ‘Anglo-Saxon unholy alliance’. ‘We abhor high global highhandedness of the strong and powerful; we abhor unilateral interference in the internal political affairs of other countries, especially smaller states. We accordingly jealously guard our sovereignty against such interference’ (The Guardian, 3 December 2003).

For the Zimbabwe government-owned Herald, Harare’s only daily paper since the banning in September 2003 of the independent Daily News, leaving the Commonwealth only dealt ‘with the symptoms and not the cause of the disease’. The real issue was not the Commonwealth ‘or any other third parties’, but Britain ‘and its Prime Minister, Tony Blair’. Zimbabwe should sever diplomatic ties with London because sanctions brought about by Britain had ‘savage[ed]’ the economy. ‘The country’s political landscape has been put into disarray following the creation of the British-sponsored MDC and a host of non-governmental organisations that have sought to cause mayhem and instability in the country by staging foolish demonstrations and media campaigns designed to precipitate instability and undermine the Zimbabwean government’. International concern about human rights, democracy, press freedom and the independence of the judiciary were, the Herald concluded, ‘a smokescreen to maintain the colonial grip [of Britain] on Zimbabwe’ (The Herald, 9 December 2003).

In making this argument, the Herald was simply repeating the oft-expressed view of the minister of information that the West was seeking ‘regime change in Zimbabwe ... through acts of economic sabotage ... under cover of instruments of democracy, human rights, rule of law, good governance, to sound reasonable’ (Mail & Guardian, 7 November 2003). Much more important was the fact that it almost immediately became clear that was also the position held by all of Zimbabwe’s partners in the 14-nation Southern African Development Community, the South African government, and Mbeki himself. Thwarted in attempts both to replace the incumbent Commonwealth secretary general with a candidate whom it could bend to its will, and to restore Zimbabwe to full membership, Mbeki and his entourage had returned home angry and defiant. A statement issued by the South African department of foreign affairs on behalf of Lesotho, currently chairing SADC’s Politics, Defence and Security committee, deplored ‘the dismissive, intolerant and rigid attitude displayed by some members of the Commonwealth’. The decision to keep Zimbabwe suspended, noted South Africa’s deputy Foreign Minister, had been ‘procedurally wrong and undermines the very principles of democracy that many claim to champion’. It was a decision that said less about Zimbabwe than it did about an already divided Commonwealth whose very relevance was at stake (Natal Mercury, 10 December 2003; The Guardian, 12 December 2003).

The tone sounded by Mbeki a few days later in his weekly online letter was notably aggrieved. In words which might have been penned by Mugabe himself, he argued that Britain was the problem, not Zimbabwe. At the core of the present crisis in Zimbabwe was the land question for which successive British governments were entirely culpable as it was them who had ‘protected the property rights of the white settler colonial “kith and kin”’. ZANU-PF, whose liberation struggle credentials
were impeccable and whose democratic bona fides in the last presidential election had been vouched for by the South African Observer mission, if not by the Commonwealth, had only been singled out for attack once the West deliberately decided to ‘treat human rights as a tool’ for overthrowing the government of Zimbabwe’. Quoting the Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, to the effect that ‘imperialism has [so] distorted the view of African realities ... [that] it has turned reality upside down’, Mbeki insisted that Zimbabwe was a prime example of this process. ‘Those who fought for a democratic Zimbabwe, with thousands paying the supreme price during the struggle, and forgave their oppressors and torturers in a spirit of national reconciliation, have been turned into repugnant enemies of democracy’, he wrote. ‘Those who, in the interest of their “kith and kin”, did what they could to deny the people of Zimbabwe their liberty, for as long as they could, have become the eminent defenders of the democratic rights of the people of Zimbabwe’ (ANC Today, 12 December 2003). Having delivered this broadside, and abjuring African intellectuals to ‘always refuse to “rationalise the upside-down way of looking at Africa”’, Mbeki then left for Harare where he met at length with Mugabe and ZANU-PF, and briefly with the opposition MDC. ‘Our countries have shared common problems. As they shared the common problems of oppression, they share common problems today’, he declared on arrival. ‘President Mugabe can assist us to confront the problems we have in South Africa so that we can assist you to solve the problems that face Zimbabwe’ (The Herald, 18 December 2003).

With Nigeria increasingly written off by Harare as a dupe of Western interests for having acquiesced, however reluctantly, in the extension of Zimbabwe’s suspension from the Commonwealth (Vanguard, 25 February 2004; Sunday Mail, 8 August 2004), the importance of Mbeki and SADC’s continued support for Mugabe could hardly be exaggerated. Misleading claims by Mbeki in February 2004 that ZANU-PF and the MDC were about to embark on formal talks to resolve their differences (Business Day, 10 February 2004), were followed a day later by further ministerial expressions of understanding and sympathy for Zimbabwe’s plight. Refusing to criticise Zimbabwean legislation obliging news media to register with the government or face closure, South Africa’s Minister for Foreign Affairs went on to argue, as Mbeki had done before her, that it was Britain’s backing for white settlers in its former colony which had complicated efforts to find a political solution to the crisis (The Star, 11 February 2004). As this line of argument was essentially the same as the one long pursued by ZANU-PF, it not only received prominent coverage in Zimbabwe’s state-controlled press, but also was taken up in one form or another by Mugabe himself at the end of the month. Speaking at one of several elaborate celebrations held to mark his 80th birthday, Mugabe attacked Britain and the United States for seeking to topple his regime. So long as the MDC was ‘dictated upon from abroad’, he added, ‘we will find it extremely difficult to negotiate with them ... We can’t discuss with allies of the Western countries that want to destroy our economy’. Only once the MDC’s ‘umbilical cord’ with the West was severed, would he listen to what it had to say. ‘They should try to be part of us, they should try to think as Zimbabweans, as Africans’ (Business Day, 25 February 2004).

Not, apparently, that it would make much difference anyway. Mugabe was quoted as saying that whatever happened ‘[Morgan] Tsvangirai will never defeat me in an election’. It was a claim Mugabe could make secure in the knowledge that in recent weeks he had signed a presidential decree permitting detention without bail for up to four weeks, even as two of the country’s last remaining independent judges resigned their posts. In much the same period the chairman of the National Constitutional Assembly was brutally assaulted by armed police and left for dead.
during a march for constitutional reform (Sunday Times, 22 February 2004). An appeal to Mbeki from the South African Council of Churches urging him to send a delegation to Harare to rekindle talks between ZANU-PF and the MDC drew only the blandest of non-committal replies: ‘President Mbeki agreed with the churches that there was no substitute for dialogue and that South Africa should do everything possible to assist the people of Zimbabwe to find a solution to their problems’ (Cape Times, 25 February 2004). It certainly left Mugabe free to threaten to put his opposition to ‘eternal sleep’, as he again ruled out talks with the MDC. ‘There is no room for unity with those that do not believe that this country and its forests, animals, even snakes and mosquitoes belong to us’ (Sunday Mail, 4 April 2004). Basking in plaudits from delegates attending a conference of former southern African liberation movements and their African-American and British sympathisers, as well as a renewed pledge of support from Namibia’s President Nujoma, towards the end of April Zimbabwe’s leader flew south to attend Mbeki’s second-term presidential inauguration. An honoured guest, Mugabe was one of a handful of African heads of state invited to the ceremony. When he and his wife arrived at Pretoria’s Union Buildings, they received a standing ovation from the assembled South African and foreign dignitaries. Their reception from the crowd was more ecstatic still. ‘Thousands of party-goers attending a public concert on lawns below the buildings whooped and cheered as huge television screens showed Mugabe’s arrival’, reported Reuters. ‘He is a hero as far as the African struggle is concerned’, confided one black businessman. ‘He has done so much to liberate the African people. We know the problems that are going on in Zimbabwe, but they will bounce back’ (The Star, 27 April 2004).

In fact, this was precisely what appeared to be happening. By mid-year, Mugabe was convinced that the tide of events was now running strongly in his favour (Reuters, 26 April 2004; The Herald, 29 April 2004). SADC support for his regime had waxed rather than waned; inflation had begun to fall; and ZANU-PF had racked up a series of by-election victories, leaving the MDC in disarray, ‘hit by factionalism and demoralised by ... relentless street pressure from pro-government youths’. Little wonder, then, that Mugabe was described by the press as ‘walking with a new spring in his step’ (Pretoria News, 31 May 2004). Addressing the concluding session of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of Nations annual summit, held in Maputo during the last week of June 2004, Mugabe’s confidence was matched only by his intransigence. ‘Eleven years I spent in prison fighting for democracy, for one man, one vote and for us now to hear a voice from London saying there is no democracy, no freedom, no human rights observed in Zimbabwe is very offensive and repulsive’, declared Mugabe. For this reason ‘we will not allow erstwhile imperialists to come and judge our election ...[they] must be supervised only by people of our region, people of Africa, people in the Third World’. Commenting on the sustained applause which greeted Mugabe’s remarks, Mozambique’s President Joachim Chissano told a news conference after the end of the summit that the Zimbabwean leader had ‘taken advantage of the situation to clarify his position ... [and] many heard that message favourably and with a great deal of sympathy’ (Mail & Guardian, 25 June 2004).

Mugabe’s speech was made only a matter of weeks after the expiry of Mbeki’s self-imposed deadline for a resolution to the crisis in Zimbabwe. The previous year, Mbeki had taken it upon himself at the annual World Economic Forum Africa meeting to predict that some kind of political agreement would be made within the next 12 months, but when pressed at the 2004 summit to account for the failure of his prediction, the South African president was utterly unfazed by the question.
Generally things are moving quite well towards addressing insecurity and instability on the continent', he said. 'All of these conflicts [in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sudan, Liberia, and Zimbabwe] are at least moving in the right direction' (Cape Argus, 3 June 2004). While an open letter from Amnesty International and 20 human rights groups, many of them based in Zimbabwe, urging the South African government in particular to take a ‘more public stand in resolving the crisis in Zimbabwe’ went unanswered (Mail & Guardian, 25 June 2004), Mbeki’s indirect response made it clear where he thought the problem lay. At the end of June, the MDC leadership was summoned to Pretoria where Mbeki told them ‘he was frustrated by the slow pace of dialogue’ (Cape Times, 2 July 2004). What his official spokesperson did not disclose, however, when informing the news media of that particular meeting, was that some time earlier in the month Mbeki and leading ANC officials had met secretly with senior members of ZANU-PF. Held in the ANC’s central Johannesburg headquarters, the purpose of the meeting was to forge closer political ties between the two ‘sister’ parties. With both parties acknowledging that ZANU-PF delegations ‘regularly visited the ANC to study organisational and strategic issues’, a ZANU-PF politburo member revealed that the ANC ‘has in principle agreed to send between four and six “strategists” to assist [ZANU-PF] during the forthcoming election’ (Sunday Times, 11 July 2004).

Although this specific arrangement was immediately denied by the ANC’s Secretary-General, further signs of South African support were not long in appearing. On 3 July 2004 the African Union’s Commission on Human and People’s Rights presented its long-delayed report on the situation in Zimbabwe, as well as certain other African countries. Based on a fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe in June 2002 soon after the disputed presidential elections, the report found that there was sufficient evidence ‘to suggest pervasive human rights violations’. Having been presented with ‘testimony from witnesses who were victims of police violence and other victims of torture while in police custody ... [together with] evidence that a system of arbitrary arrests took place’, the mission was ‘prepared and able to rule that the [Zimbabwe] government cannot wash its hands of responsibility for these happenings’ (Financial Gazette, 8-14 July 2004). Furious that the report’s contents had finally found their way into the public domain, Zimbabwe’s Foreign Affairs Minister, Stan Mudenge, insisted that his government had not seen nor had a chance to respond to its findings. But his demand that the report, which he described as the work ‘of British agents in Zimbabwe ... [and] fit only for the dustbin’ (The Herald, 9 July 2004), should simply be thrown out by the African Union, ran into objections from Nigeria. It was at this crucial juncture that the South African Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, ‘climbed into the ring to support him’ (Mail & Guardian, 9 July 2004). Her intervention, for all that she subsequently denied that she had supported Zimbabwean attempts to shelve the report, apparently succeeded in having discussion postponed until such time as the Harare government formally responded (Mail & Guardian, 16 July 2004). The report, as a result, was neither adopted by the Africa Union’s foreign ministers, nor was it included on the agenda of the summit of African leaders in Addis Ababa later that same week (Cape Argus, 9 July 2004).

The African Union’s failure to adopt its own human rights report was greeted with dismay by the MDC. ‘It will simply serve to increase and prolong the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe’, observed one party official. ‘The bureaucratic and procedural pretext that has been used to justify postponing discussion of an important internal document ... is perplexing and contradictory given that the AU, since its inauguration, has built up an impressive reputation as a force for good in Africa’
(Weekend Argus, 10 July 2004). But if the divisions within the AU provided a glimmer of hope for the embattled opposition within Zimbabwe, the continued solidarity evinced by the Southern African Development Community permitted no such optimism. A two-day SADC summit held in the middle of August at the Grande Baie beach resort in Mauritius resounded to praise for Mugabe and ZANU-PF’s stand against western imperialism. ‘Let SADC speak with one voice, and let the outside world understand, that to us Africans land is much more than a factor of production, we are spiritually anchored in the lands of our ancestors’, announced Tanzanian president Benjamin Mkapa, the organisation’s outgoing chairman. ‘Time has passed. We forgive those who did this to our ancestors, but now that we are in power, we cannot run away from our historical duty to set right these historical wrongs and injustices’ (Reuters, 16 August 2004).

It was only because Zimbabwe had taken action against the legacy of colonialism that it was now criticised by the West. ‘We are tired of being lectured on democracy by the very countries which, under colonialism, either directly denied us the rights of free citizens, or were indifferent to our suffering and yearnings to break free and be democratic’, Mkapa continued. The common electoral laws and rules that the SADC leadership were about to adopt would be in keeping with the region’s political, social and cultural background. ‘In democracy as in all other things, no one size fits all. Multiparty democracy and its attendant elections must never be a cover for the destabilisation of our countries’. Just where the SADC saw the emphasis lying between democratic practice and regime stability soon enough became clear. In an intervention demonstrating perhaps that the SADC is not entirely without a sense of humour, the chairman of the Politics, Defence and Security committee, Lesotho prime minister Pakalitha Mosisili painted a glossy picture of democracy in the sub-continent. ‘I am happy to report that democracy is not just well, but is thriving’, he said (Ibid.). Similar sentiments were expressed by the Mauritian prime minister and incoming SADC chairman, Paul Berenger, who pointedly praised Mugabe, while insisting that regardless of what the West thought, next year’s elections in Zimbabwe would be free and fair (Ibid., The Guardian, 18 August 2004). For the veteran Zimbabwean ruler, who along with his fellow leaders had readily signed up to the new code of electoral conduct, this was all familiar grist to the mill. Within days of Mugabe’s return to Harare, details were published of a new bill that would ban foreign human rights groups. Under the terms of the Non-Governmental Organisations Bill, all non-governmental groups would be required to register with a regulatory council. Local organisations would be barred from receiving foreign funding, and no group whose “sole or principal objects involve or include issues of governance” – seen as “the promotion and protection of human rights and political governance issues” – would be licensed (Sunday Times, 22 August 2004). As the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare readily explained,

This legislation should not come as a surprise to patent adversaries of the government. It was long overdue. Foreign-funded and foreign organisations have demonstrated that they are a threat to national security when it comes to governance issues (The Star, 23 August 2004).

Conclusions
This article has suggested that the current crisis in Zimbabwe, personified in the figure of its president, Robert Mugabe, has assumed a wider emblematic significance for the Southern African sub-continent and parts of the non-Western world. At every available opportunity Mugabe and ZANU-PF have deftly employed an anti-imperialist discourse which has resonated in a number of key forums. By doing this,
the regime has been able to represent the fundamental human and civic rights questions placed on the Zimbabwean political agenda since the 1990s, as marginal, elite-focused issues, driven by western interests, and having little relation to urgent problems of economic redistribution. As a result, many radical nationalists in the wider African continent and the diaspora have averted their gaze from Harare’s repressive domestic policies. What they see instead is Mugabe and ZANU-PF paying the price of imperialist opprobrium for daring to confront the enduring inequalities of the colonial era and the dominant orthodoxies of the international financial institutions. Moreover, it is a perspective given all the more credence in the eyes of some observers by the arrogance and aggression of the Bush/Blair axis, especially where the latter has provided the Mugabe regime with endless examples of western hypocrisy and double standards (Shivji, 2003:109-118; Boateng & Orakwue, 2003; 2004).

Consequently, when opponents of ZANU-PF have expressed their criticisms of the regime through the language of human rights and democracy, they have struggled to make their voices heard above the clamour of anti-imperialism. Their protests have either been grotesquely misrepresented or simply ignored. Six weeks before Zimbabwe’s presidential election in 2002, the leader of the National Union of Namibian Workers took it upon himself to attack the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions for its alliance with the MDC. ‘The trade unions are being used by the whites to make the world believe that there is tension between the Zimbabwean working class and the political leadership ... Comrades, stop being used as puppets’ (Namibian, 22 January 2002). Although COSATU has protested repeatedly against the arrest and imprisonment of trade unionists in Zimbabwe, South Africa’s ANC government has not lifted a finger as ZANU-PF has trampled its opponents into the dust. Indeed, Mbeki has gone out of his way to justify what has happened in Zimbabwe. It is precisely this misplaced sense of Pan-Africanist solidarity which fails to recognise that ‘not all that is oppressive is derived from hegemony: any assessment of oppression and denial of rights has to combine denunciation of that which is exogenous, imperial or hegemonic, and that which is endogenous, nativist and instrumentally “authentic”. Those with power ... can, and do, use this rhetoric of rejection of “western values” to legitimate their own forms of domination’ (Halliday, 2001:29). Southern African states have yet to embrace a Pan-Africanist vision that ‘brooks neither external dependence nor internal authoritarianism and social deprivation’ (Mafeje, 2001:4). Until they do, activists and academics alike will be left to ponder the irony of the cry by the desperate inhabitants of Chitungwiza, the huge dormitory township just outside Harare: ‘Mr Bush, when are you coming to liberate us? (The Independent, 19 April 2003).

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Endnotes

1. ANC Today, 9 May 2003. For further discussion of Mbeki’s views on Zimbabwe, see Mbeki (2002) and Sparks (2003).

2. The Star, 16 May 2003. For Mashabela, see Focus, (31), 2003. See also Scotland on Sunday, 26 October 2003, quoting ‘sources close to the Commonwealth Secretariat’: ‘It’s not just landless Africans who admire him [Mugabe], Aborigines, Maoris and even Mexicans think he is a fighter for economic justice in the Third World’.
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