

Zimbabwe: Time for Thabo to Lead, or Leave

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On a continent famous for many outstanding statesmen, there have been some truly unpleasant leaders in Africa. Malawi's Hastings Banda and Uganda's Idi Amin Dada are archetypes. Yet, the regime of Robert Mugabe remains a casebook study in tyranny, determined to hold power at any cost to its people while the "international community" does what it recently did in Burma. Nothing.

Since act 1 - the atrocities of Matabeleland - Mugabe has constructed his epic tragedy using the so-called liberation war veterans to violently force farmers from their land and brutally intimidate political opponents. He has publicly compared himself to Adolf Hitler (*Panorama, BBC TV, 2004*). Unlike Hitler, however, he has caused not solved inflation and ruined Africa's healthiest economy, creating unemployment, disease, starvation and misery for millions of Zimbabweans. When the country's Supreme Court, on rare occasions, has found the courage to defy him he has simply ignored its rulings through the common mechanism of the tyrant, the special decree.

He perverted the outcome of the most recent elections through pressure on the electoral commission, which took a month to partially announce voting returns and has still not fully released them, though the nationwide results posted immediately at polling booths showed a substantial victory for the Movement for Democratic Change*. Since then, Mugabe has steadily increased pressure on anyone who may oppose him in the forthcoming presidential run-off election, itself a farce, employing thugs to threaten, beat and, allegedly, to murder MDC supporters. External media and independent election monitors are banned, though the courageous undercover reporting of ABC and BBC journalists leaves little room for doubt about these events.

Now, presumably for his personal safety, Mugabe appears to have cut a deal with Zimbabwe's military. The MDC Secretary-General has been arrested on treason charges based, according to a brother in Australia, on a forgery. The party leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, viciously beaten up last year, is effectively prevented from election campaigning by regular detention, release and re-detention. MDC voters are denied food aid, available only through Mugabe's Zanu PF party. Most recently, whether speaking for himself or the army, Mugabe has threatened civil war and publicly stated that the democratic opposition will never be permitted to govern; and if further proof of his lunacy were needed, he now claims a divinely appointed right to rule and once again blames Gt Britain for all Zimbabwe's hardship. Britain, like all former colonial powers, has much to answer for in Africa, but not for this. Zanu PF's sweetly smiling election posters, meanwhile, offer soothing captions suggesting that all is entirely well in Zimbabwe, thanks to them.

There is one African leader who could have helped prevent all this – the South African president, Thabo Mbeki. But the man who took up Nelson Mandela's mantle has not only denied the link between HIV and AIDS and kept anti-retroviral drugs from AIDS sufferers; himself presided over dramatic economic inequality; and done little to protect foreign refugees from mob violence. He has consistently appeased this modern day Amin. Kenyan, Tanzanian and Angolan leaders have now publicly pressured Mugabe. Gordon Brown says it's all an outrage. Zzzz. Condoleeza Rice says "It's time for the world to get tough with Zimbabwe". Well, go on then.

It won't happen, of course, and Mbecki's deafening silence continues. The time when he could plausibly use the 'African Brothers in Arms' notion as an excuse for silence is long gone. The horror of life in Zimbabwe increases daily and the "international community" will do nothing. It is time for Thabo Mbecki to speak. Whatever he may have tried behind the scenes has served only to grant impunity to Mugabe, which Mugabe knows. Before the final, scarcely imaginable Act of this Tragedy plays out, and for the sake of his suffering fellow Africans, Mbecki must say "Mugabe must go". If he fails to do this, he will leave to history the perception, already current, of being perhaps Africa's weakest leader of modern times.

Footnotes: Zimbabwe's Ambassador to Australia (SBS News, 17/6/08) said the MDC had perpetrated serious violence on Zanu PF supporters. On June 18, Zimbabwe's government was reported to have withdrawn its ban on food distribution by NGOs (unconfirmed). Thabo Mbecki has since travelled to Harare to meet Robert Mugabe but made no statement. On June 22, the MDC withdrew from the run-off election saying that over 70 of its supporters had been murdered and further loss of life was unacceptable. Mr Mugabe continued with the election as the sole candidate, won it with a vote of "over 90%" and declared himself President. On July 27, Mr Mbecki criticised the UN Resolution to charge the Sudanese President, Hassan Omar al-Bashir, with genocide in Darfur.