



Zimbabwe and South Africa: Security Takes Precedence Over Economy

Catherine Grant Makokera¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

- South Africa should continue to play the role of regional and international leader in managing the Zimbabwe situation by pursuing a strategy that goes beyond security and political concerns to consider the economic implications of what might happen in the near future.
- Zimbabwe is a critical country when it comes to southern Africa's integration agenda. SADC needs to engage with the deepening economic crisis at the highest level (beyond just discussing delays in the implementation of its Protocol on Trade).
- Greater co-operation should be fostered between the government and private sector in South Africa to develop a more effective economic diplomacy response to the situation in Zimbabwe.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Africa and its partners in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) removed Zimbabwe from its agenda following the July 2013 elections in Zimbabwe, which saw Zanu-PF return to power. The decision by SADC to end regional monitoring for Zimbabwe was based on security and political considerations that overlooked the longer-term implications of a slow economic meltdown. The decision also highlights how South Africa's economic diplomacy has not progressed much beyond the promotion of trade and investment. A key factor hindering its success is the lack of co-operation and communication between the South African government and the private sector. South Africa's relationship with Zimbabwe would benefit from a shared approach that involves all stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has officially featured on SADC's agenda since 2001. The country has preoccupied leaders in the region for well over a decade now. South African presidents, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, have both had to deal with Zimbabwe as one of the more high-profile and complex foreign-policy challenges during their administrations. This policy brief considers South Africa's approach to Zimbabwe since the country's most recent elections, in 2013. The focus is South Africa's economic diplomacy. It is not possible here to undertake a detailed historical assessment of the relations between the two countries, but recent developments will be considered within the broader context of a long history of engagement.

ZIMBABWE'S 2013 ELECTIONS: A SIGH OF RELIEF

In the lead-up to Zimbabwe's elections, which took place on 31 July 2013, South Africa played the unenviable role of facilitator on behalf of SADC. But

it was not only the region that looked to Zuma and his team to lead the efforts to restore democracy in Zimbabwe: the broader African and global communities also deferred to the South Africans in their endeavour. The world acknowledged the need for a regional solution to the political stand-off in Zimbabwe, especially in light of the failed efforts by the Commonwealth and the limited effect of targeted sanctions deployed by the US, the EU and others. South Africa's intervention in Zimbabwe also made sense from a domestic point of view, given the pressure of migration from Zimbabwe and Zimbabwe's crucial location in the region in terms of trade and integration. If South Africa is to succeed in championing the development of the North–South Corridor infrastructure initiative, then a stable Zimbabwe is a prerequisite.

South Africa had achieved a positive outcome and enhanced its credibility as a capable regional leader when it played an important role in 2008 in encouraging the formation of the Government of National Unity – a coalition between Zanu-PF and the two factions of the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This new arrangement was seen to have broken the political deadlock in Zimbabwe and provided much-needed economic relief from the crippling effects of the country's hyperinflation and economic decline in the early 2000s. A road map was agreed upon that would see Zimbabwe take steps towards a new constitution and the restoration of democracy. SADC endorsed this process and considerable South African resources were deployed to see it implemented.

With Zuma personally leading the process, the South African facilitation team set the groundwork in place for regional support for the elections that took place in July 2013. Interestingly, the initiative came from within the South African Presidency, and not the Department of International Relations and Cooperation. In his first term in office, Zuma delegated much of the responsibility for policy development and implementation to the appropriate government departments and agencies, in stark contrast to his predecessor, who had centralised many activities in the Presidency. But, for Zuma, Zimbabwe was an exception. The president's personal involvement reflects the importance South Africa placed on this matter. And it reinforced a sense in the

international community that South Africa's 'quiet diplomacy' on Zimbabwe – an approach pursued by Mbeki – was simply an excuse not to have to tackle President Robert Mugabe head-on.

After the elections, Zuma was one of the first to express his satisfaction with the outcome.² Other SADC member states were quick to join South Africa in declaring the elections free and peaceful.³ The AU endorsed the results of the elections,⁴ which saw Mugabe return to office on the back of new-found levels of support for Zanu-PF. Both SADC and the AU went on to firmly welcome Mugabe back into the fold when in August 2013 he became chair of SADC and in January 2014 vice chair of the AU.

It was as if South Africa and other nations in the region had breathed an audible sigh of relief and were finally able to take Zimbabwe off the official SADC agenda following the 2013 elections. The regional road map may not have been followed to the letter but there was nevertheless a sense that SADC had done all that it could. Most countries in the region, with the notable exception of Botswana, were happy to accept the outcome.

SECURITY FIRST FOR SOUTH AFRICA

When Zuma assumed office in 2009, there were mixed views about what to expect from his administration in terms of foreign policy. It was suggested that he would be a more domestically oriented leader than his predecessor, Mbeki. Although Zuma came to office with significant experience in other African countries (including his role as a conflict mediator), people did not envisage that he would be as active a champion of the pan-African agenda. These assumptions, however, turned out to be unfounded; Zuma has continued to place Africa at the heart of South Africa's foreign policy.

When it came to Zimbabwe, there was hope from some quarters, including within the region and Zimbabwe itself, that Zuma would be able to act as an honest broker in the conflict there more than Mbeki had. Under Mbeki, South Africa was perceived to have taken sides in Zimbabwe, displaying an obvious partiality for Zanu-PF. Mbeki's view of the MDC leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, has been described as 'disdainful'⁵ and there was no hiding the fact that he did not respect the opposition party in Zimbabwe.

Mbeki seemed to buy into the populist messaging used by Mugabe and Zanu-PF that the MDC were simply a stalking horse for imperialist Western interests in Africa. There is no doubt that these sentiments resonated with Mbeki's pan-Africanist ideology and his vision of an African renaissance. Zuma, on the other hand, did not display the same characteristics. Instead, he demonstrated a degree of affinity with Tsvangirai, which suggested he would show greater impartiality in his facilitation efforts with Zimbabwe.

Against this background, the decisions made by South Africa and SADC to allow the elections to proceed in July 2013 and then to quickly endorse the victory of Zanu-PF have been questioned. Why did South Africa not insist on full implementation of the SADC road map? Why did the region not take a much stronger line on the irregularities in the elections? There is no clear answer but as mentioned previously, there was a sense of relief that South Africa no longer had the pressure of having to focus so much diplomatic effort on Zimbabwe.

This alone, however, does not explain South Africa's stance. It has been suggested that the main reason for South Africa's swift reaction to the elections was a desire to ensure the stability of the security situation in Zimbabwe.⁶ South Africa's policy response does also appear to have been largely informed by intelligence and security concerns. This reinforces South Africa's desire to limit the influx of migrants from Zimbabwe and to minimise potential risk of military engagement there. Broader foreign-policy and economic concerns had been relegated in South Africa's assessment of the possible situation in Zimbabwe following the election.

It is difficult to assess the merits of South Africa's view of the security situation in Zimbabwe. Certain military leaders in Zimbabwe had made public pronouncements to the effect that they would not recognise an MDC victory.⁷ These could have been taken as an indication that there might be a military coup should Zanu-PF not win the elections, which may have been a concern for South Africa. Others have argued, however, that this was the position of only a small part of the military elite and that any kind of military-led coup in Zimbabwe would be difficult to sustain without broader support from the lower-ranking officers.⁸ Furthermore, the 2013

elections were marked by lower levels of violence and intimidation than had been seen in the past and there was no indication that a security threat existed at the time of the elections.

South Africa's policy on Zimbabwe can arguably be attributed to concerns for ensuring security and, to a certain degree, political stability. There appears to have been little consideration given to the economic aspects of the crisis faced by Zimbabwe and the region as a whole. Under the national unity government, a level of economic stability had been achieved in Zimbabwe. The then finance minister, Tendai Biti, had scrapped the Zimbabwean dollar and instituted a staff-monitored programme with the International Monetary Fund. Development-finance institutions, such as the African Development Bank, and some Western donors were showing an increased appetite for supporting socio-economic development in Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, though, much of these efforts did not reach their full potential before the 2013 election.

With an outright victory for Zanu-PF in the 2013 elections, hope for sustaining any kind of economic recovery in the short term disappeared. From an economic perspective, it was the worst possible outcome and had been feared by the shrinking Zimbabwean business community.⁹ Another Mugabe administration would have no credibility with the international community and the country had exhausted its relations with new partners, such as China. With the MDC largely responsible for economic policy during the government of national unity, Zanu-PF had undermined the efforts of Biti and others to kick-start the economy. This had the effect of cutting off essential new investment and recapitalisation in Zimbabwe.

It is proving difficult for the current Zanu-PF government to undo these blockages now that it needs all mechanisms at its disposal to improve the economy. Zimbabwe is facing a severe liquidity crisis, with fiscal pressure mounting on the state budget, which is largely used to pay the salaries of civil servants. Zanu-PF has long used patronage to maintain power and support. The administration has allocated positions within government and state-owned enterprises to loyal party members. These things all cost money and have implications for the economy as a whole. Zanu-PF's ability to balance the

competing demands of maintaining political power and some kind of functioning economy is becoming increasingly tenuous. The effects might not be felt as immediately as those of a coup or political uprising but there will be a slow economic meltdown, which will have serious implications for South Africa and the rest of the region.

SOUTH AFRICA'S ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY

Zimbabwe can provide lessons about South Africa's approach to economic diplomacy and its overall place in its regional foreign policy. With Zimbabwe, South Africa's economic concerns took second place to those of security and political expediency. This is not surprising and reflects South Africa's reluctance to use its economic muscle in the region to influence the development of its neighbours. It is clear that South Africa prefers to work within regional structures, even in circumstances where it might have different national interests and additional leverage available to it at a bilateral level. Zimbabwe is a good example of this. There are high levels of trade between the two countries and significant investment by private South African companies and parastatals. And Zimbabwe provides a geographic link between South Africa and other markets in the region, which are becoming increasingly important for South Africa's export growth.

South Africa has used a number of tools of economic diplomacy to engage with Zimbabwe, including promotion of trade and investment, and initiating discussions at a regional level on implementation of the SADC Protocol on Trade. These initiatives are not part of a broader, co-ordinated strategy on Zimbabwe developed by the government of South Africa in collaboration with its business community. This is a failing that reflects the overall lack of interaction between the state and the private sector on foreign policy in general. Mistrust continues to exist between these stakeholders and, as a result,

the overall approach South Africa takes on issues such as Zimbabwe does not benefit from information on the broader picture, especially the likely economic impact of its approach. To be a true regional power, South Africa needs to first look internally at its ability to leverage its own resources (including those of the private sector) for mutually agreed regional development objectives.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Catherine Grant Makokera is a research associate at the South African Institute of International Affairs. She has conducted research on regional integration, trade and state-business relations in southern Africa.
- 2 South African Government News Agency, 'President Zuma congratulates Mugabe on re-election', 4 August 2013, <http://www.sanews.gov.za/africa/president-zuma-congratulates-mugabe-re-election>.
- 3 Southern African Development Community, 'Preliminary statement of the SADC election observer mission', 31 July 2014, http://www.sadc.int/files/4313/7545/6616/FINAL_Preliminary_Statement_of_the_SADC_Election_Observer_Mission_to_the_July_31_2013_Zimbabwe_Harmonised_Elections_as_at1148_on_August_02_2013.pdf.
- 4 African Union Commission, 'Report of African Union election observation mission to the 31 July 2013 harmonised elections in the Republic of Zimbabwe', <http://pa.au.int/en/sites/default/files/AUEOM%20REPORT%20ZIMBABWE%202013.pdf>.
- 5 Interview with South African business leader, April 2013.
- 6 Interview with South African government official, October 2013.
- 7 Takudzwa Munyaka, 'MDC prepared for coup if it wins Zim election', *Mail & Guardian*, 2 August 2013, <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-08-02-00-mdc-prepared-for-possible-army-coup>.
- 8 Interview with Zimbabwean commentator, September 2013.
- 9 Interviews with Zimbabwean business owners, September 2013.

The Economic Diplomacy Programme is funded by the Open Society Foundation, South Africa. SAIIA gratefully acknowledges this support.

© SAIIA 2015 All rights reserved. Opinions expressed are the responsibility of the individual authors and not of SAIIA.